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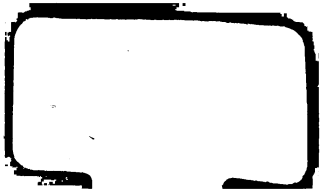

HER UNWELCOME HUSBAND

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W. L. GEORGE

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A Bed of Roses
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Her Unwelcome Husband

BY

W. L. GEORGE

Author of "Ursula Trent," "Caliban," Etc.

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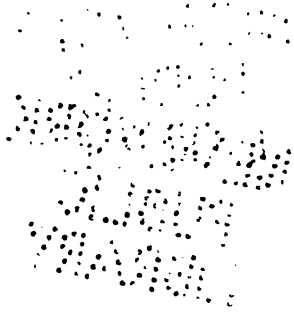

TO
MRS. HERBERT GEIPEL

TRANSFER FROM C. 9. JUN 1924

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HER UNWELCOME HUSBAND

HER UNWELCOME HUSBAND

CHAPTER I

THE SEEING EYE

BOTH hands outspread against the window-pane, Booker looked out through the aviary into the garden which now lay placid and sodden under the obstinate spring rain. She swung toward and away from the glass where she could see, softened and dim, the hard lines of her countenance, now more, then less distinct. "Like somebody else," thought Booker, and then: "Makes company."

Mrs. Headcorn's maid was rather sad. She hated the country, which sounded so nice in serials, but in fact seemed to be inhabited solely by bare-branched trees, twisted by the wind into the likeness of heads of hair, as if distracted women screaming in the blast; the country meant mud over the instep; it meant an awful, shopless, busless, movieless world.

Beyond the window-pane, in their little gallery, some melancholy cockatoos sat frozen and misavic.

Their flocculent heads and ruffs sank disagreeably into their shrinking white and yellow shoulders. They sat at equal distances upon their perches, their wrinkled eyelids low, their beaks buried for warmth into their breasts. Their mangers were almost full. They were too cold and wretched to eat. Booker had offered them bits of apple that morning, thus endeavoring to promote conviviality, but they cared for nothing. Booker understood them. She gave a heavy sigh. In the garden, where pools had formed on the flagged terraces, stood slender fruit trees: one of these, apple or pear (or peach? How was one to know what these things were called?), was optimistically putting forward a fine dust of blossom. Then the landscape rose slowly toward a hill, its contours muffled by a hanger thinly clad with leaves.

Booker wondered why she had locked herself up in Cantrel Court, in wild Farnshire, with five miles of dampness between her and the mild gaieties of Basingalton. Well, she was forty-eight, and had spent all those years in London, except weekends and holidays devoted to solo whist and scandal in the housekeepers' rooms and servants' halls of a hundred country houses. Recently she had wanted to make a change: the idea of the country had seized her. She thought of red-roofed cottages, like the advertisements of the Metropolitan Railway, of lambs with blue bows round their necks, and some story about dancing round a Maypole. Well . . .

she supposed she'd come over soppy. Still the rain fell grayly, and she could see the wind ruffling the sparse leaves on the distant hanger.

From the garden-room behind her came the sound of a heavy breath; there was a moment of struggle in the doorway. Languidly Booker turned to survey without excitement Hilda, the under-housemaid, who, in large and widely outstretched pink arms, held a circular mat and a box. The sight of Hilda was repulsive to her. Booker would have told Mrs. Headcorn that it wasn't the business of her own maid to organize parlor games for her guests, if her mistress had not conveyed that she could rely on nobody else. Indeed, one needed only to glance at Hilda, nineteen, round-faced, round-bodied, with surprised blue eyes, and a pleasant, silly mouth, to realize that the dexterity of London alone could dominate the wild. Booker felt that Hilda was another outrage on this wet day. She was for a moment minded to turn again to the aviary where the cockatoos had not moved, beyond which the same rain seemed to fall into the same puddles. Hilda, with a characteristically Hilda-ish movement, suddenly dropped mat and box, which made a frightful crash, and Booker was compelled to abandon her abstractions, to return to a brutal world.

"Lucky it ain't glass," said Hilda.

"You'd have done it if it had been glass," said Booker, coldly.

"Ow! Mrs. Booker, you do go on," said Hilda, with short arms extended about the circular target, giggling at her superior's wit.

Booker said nothing, but watched Hilda, who made vain efforts to hang it on a nail in the middle of the oak door. It was fascinating to watch the red-haired maid totter on her square toes and strive to hitch the cord on a nail too high for her, or take awkward little jumps, and, limp as a sack, fall back with one heel against the box of darts. This seemed part of the contemptible proceedings of the day. Booker was led to comment: "What'll they be up to next? You might think they were a lot of kids, the way they go on. Fact is, as soon as they get away from cards, they don't know what to do with themselves. That's the worst of the upper classes, Hilda; they don't know what to do with themselves."

"That's true, Mrs. Booker," said Hilda.

"You might think they'd find plenty to do, what with cards, and dancing, and calling on each other, and telling each other what they noticed while they called. But they don't know how to pass the time. Not really. Take this lot. You'd have thought they'd have had something better to do than play darts, like they do in the low public houses in London. Shows there ain't so much difference between us and them as they make out."

"Ow! Mrs. Booker," said Hilda, "you do know a lot of things."

Booker accepted the tribute, and Hilda, seizing the mat, took a desperate run at the door, hitched the cord over the nail, and in typical Hilda-ish style tore the nail out, so that she was precipitated nose forward on to the floor. As she picked herself up she remarked: "Drat!"

"Don't say 'drat,'" said Booker.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Booker. I know I didn't orter, but it sort of slipped out."

"Oh, I don't mean that, Hilda. Only persons of fashion don't say 'drat.' They say 'damn.'"

"Ow! Mrs. Booker! I couldn't."

"Well, wait until you've seen more of the world, Hilda," said Booker loftily. "That is, if you stick to good houses, of course. Nowadays, a woman isn't a real lady unless she can have a word with a taxi-driver. And believe me, the higher the society the hotter the talk."

"Mrs. Booker! You don't really mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. The way you talk one might think they weren't flesh and blood. Why don't you keep your eyes open? Then you'd learn a bit. I've been in service for thirty-three years, and I tell you this: when anybody has more than a thousand pounds a year if it's a *he*, and three hundred a year if it's a *she*, they're worth watching."

"Watching?" repeated Hilda, circular-eyed.

"Yes, if one wants to know what's going on. Take this house, for instance. If I liked to say anything. . . . But, there, I never was one to make mischief."

Hilda stared at Booker for a moment, understanding only by degrees that there was something to understand. Then at last she remarked: "I don't see what you mean, Mrs. Booker."

"No, you don't seem to have kept your eyes open, though you look as though you did. What's Mr. Rodbourne doing here?"

"Visiting."

"Ar! Who's he visiting? Who's the lady?"

"You don't mean that the missis . . ." gasped Hilda.

"You make me tired," replied Booker. "What's that Mrs. Caldecot doing here? Visiting?"

"I suppose she is," said Hilda, bewildered.

"Well, there you are," said Booker, conclusively. "Fog lifted yet?"

"What fog?" asked Hilda, looking toward the garden.

"You'll never be fit for service except in the suburbs," said Booker. "She's a fine woman, Mrs. Caldecot. Getting a bit long in the tooth perhaps, but still there's many a good tune played on an old fiddle, they say. I say Mr. Rodbourne's too young for her."

"Do you mean they're going to get married?" said Hilda.

"Not likely. In fashionable society marriage is what they call a 'peas-alley.' Besides, she's married. It doesn't worry her, her husband being on long leave, in a manner of speaking. But of course

she feels dull. So did Mr. Rodbourne feel dull till she came along."

"But how did you find out, Mrs. Booker?"

"Find out?" said Booker, contemptuously. "Of course, I didn't find out. In fashionable society nothing's found out; it's only known. But when a lady and a gentleman have just been staying with some friends in the Isle of Wight, and they're both staying here with Mrs. Headcorn, and Mrs. Frederick heard them say at dinner that they'd be meeting again next week at a third lot, well, you put two and two together. In fashionable society, when you put two and two together it makes one. Don't you take on, Hilda; they're only human. They're just like you and me, only we've got to pretend a bit, because we've got a different set of fashions. I found out what they were like when I got my divorce."

"You been divorced, Mrs. Booker?" whispered Hilda, as the opening chapter of a serial seemed to open before her.

"Yes. A lady I was with for five years said she had reason to be grateful to me, never mind why, and asked me what I'd like her to do for me. So I said I'd have a divorce. It was very exciting and quite easy, though I must say my husband helped me a lot. And the judge said lovely things about the outraged feelings of womanhood. But I only did it once, being, as you might say, only on the edge of the smart set."

"Do you mean that Mrs. Caldecot is going to have a divorce?" said Hilda, whose mind worked slowly.

"She get a divorce!" said Booker, scornfully. "The boot would be on the other leg, though I expect Mr. Caldecot's been busy too all the years he's been away. Besides, it wouldn't be any good her getting a divorce. It's too late."

"What's too late, Mrs. Booker?"

"She couldn't get Mr. Rodbourne if she was divorced ten times over. Not now. Haven't you seen him with Miss Neale?"

"Miss Patricia?"

"Not Miss Patricia, Hilda. One doesn't use a young lady's Christian name if the young lady is out, unless there are two sisters and she's the youngest. Miss Neale. He's sweet on her. Of course, he doesn't know it yet; men never do until it's too late. But he is. Mrs. Frederick says you only have to notice the way he asks her to have some salted almonds."

"Lor'!" said Hilda. "What will Mrs. Caldecot say when she finds out?"

"Oh, Hilda, you make me tired. Don't you think she knows? If she were married to him she wouldn't know. Maybe it isn't true that love is blind, but marriage is. Only Mrs. Caldecot isn't married to him, and when a woman isn't married to a man she keeps her eye on him. Course she won't let on, but I say to you that when there's an affair *de*

cure going on, the one who's out of it knows it long before those that's in it."

"Well, I never," said Hilda. Then, with a sigh, she decided to adjourn the serial, and remarked: "How am I going to put this lumping mat up now the nail's out? Suppose I must go round to the shed and find a hammer."

"Don't let that worry you," said Booker. She picked up the nail, and looked about the garden-room, where little tables were littered with carved brass brought back from India by the late Mr. Headcorn. Seizing a pot, she hammered in the nail with three or four strokes. Just as the nail went in, the drawing-room opened to admit Mrs. Headcorn who, for a moment, was made speechless by her horror and her natural volume.

"Booker!" cried Mrs. Headcorn at last. "What are you doing?"

"Hammering in a nail, Ma'am."

"Don't you know that that pot was brought back from Bangalore by Mr. Headcorn?"

"Yes, Ma'am. But I haven't done it any harm. You see, Ma'am, this is a brass-headed nail. Brass can't make a dent on brass, Ma'am."

By that time Hilda had hung up the mat, and Booker followed her out. Mrs. Headcorn said nothing. Somehow Booker always had the best of it.

For a moment Mrs. Headcorn stood in the middle of the room, smoothing the offended pot, while Chang and Suki, the Pekingese, who had followed

her in, watched it anxiously, wondering if it were not a new kind of ball. At last Mrs. Headcorn put it down again, and circulated about the garden-room, picking up cushions from chairs to put them down again, disordering the brass ash trays, and inspecting one by one scratches on articles of furniture, seeking cracks in mugs and jugs, and generally fussing. The garden-room was crowded with palms and india-rubber trees. She liked the smoothness of the leaves she handled, and she wandered into a corner to prick herself on the cactus, so as to assure herself that it was still sharp. For Mrs. Headcorn was a house maniac; she had inherited this disease from her husband, who had built Cantrel Court himself, and had designed the garden-room and aviary in such a way as to deprive the dining-room and drawing-room of all air and nearly all light. Then, opening the aviary door, upon which swung the mat, she went to see the cockatoos. But, that morning, not even the unpleasant neighborhood of Chang and Suki stirred the birds into activity.

CHAPTER II

TRIAL BY MIRROR

CLAIRE CALDECOT lay in her bath, relaxed and rather drowsy. The hot water that enveloped her to the chin seemed to armor her against a world excluded. She liked to lie motionless and to look down upon the soapy water that had the translucence of some dead greenish stone. She felt comfortable and secure. Then she played a little game, raising her feet to the surface, so that her toes might be chilled and then that she might enjoy the renewed warmth of their immersion. She had pretty feet, she thought, and held one up. Indeed, straight and slim, with toes well detached one from the other, untwisted, unswollen, with small curved nails that now shone as if the water had enameled them. She liked the very fine angle and the exaggerated arch of the sharp-cut instep. No flesh there, but bone and sinew. There was about her foot an air of disdain; the metacarpal angle was almost insolent.

She did not know why, but she could not help reflecting that it was queer that, as time went on, the smooth skin would lose that pallid, pinkish glow,

grow dry, a little harsh, that this resile of blue veins would rise up from the mat ivoriness it now ran through, making twisted cords and purpled knots. Then one day the thin foot would find it an effort to test twisting the energy of the ankle. It would move very little, then not move at all. For a time it would lie upon a white sheet and be marked only by the faint eminence it made under the sheet that covered it. And for the sake of propriety, people would equalize its lie with that of its fellow. Then it would be in the dark and time would pass. It would swell and burgeon with its own gases, the livid green skin would be sown with rifts. Her feet would assume a new shape, with the bone more evident, and twist in an unconscious agony. As time went on, the swollen flesh would dry; scrap by scrap, rosy skin, firm muscle which had trodden meadows and stepped dance would fall away into fine dust; one by one, as tendons too, ashes to ashes went, the bones would fall, be scattered, and themselves whiten and dry, and to dust go. There would the dust lie when she was forgotten, not even a phalanx by which to rebuild her in imagination. She gave a little laugh and thought, "I wonder what'll have become of my gold shoes with the red heels." And she felt a little thrill of voluptuous delight before the picture of this last and immense adventure, her own annihilation.

At last, freeing herself from this sense of weariness and comfort, Mrs. Caldecot stepped out of

her bath and wrapped herself in the hot towel which hung over the radiator. It was nice, the crisp, sandy feeling of the sharp towel. Little glows overspread her here and there, about shoulder blade or knee, as she wrapped herself in the dryness. For a moment, still swathed in the bath towel, she examined herself in the tall looking-glass which ran up the wall. She smiled at her reflection. She always thought herself funny with her head tied up in a towel, showing no hair, so white and limbs concealed. She looked like a rabbit about to be roasted. She liked to see herself as she then was, her face flushed, her nose shining in the most unfortunate way, a wisp of hair escaped and sodden. For all that crudity would soon be hidden, and she alone knew how she looked just then. She made with herself a conspiracy against the world which her toilet table deceived. Then, still smiling and half-content, she went into her bedroom to exchange the towels for a wadded dressing-gown of electric blue Chinese silk, decorated on the back in silver with a picture of a complete tea party, given to his friends by a mandarin. A shiver warned her against the cool spring air, but all the same, after a moment, being a very English woman and sure that it was good for her to do something she did not quite want to do, she bravely flung off the garment to do her exercises. For ten minutes she subjected herself to the infinite weariness of those twists, and turns, and swings. As she whirled about, the flowered pattern on the

walls figured a bewildering little film. "Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. Oh, what a bore!" She liked bending back. It made a nice little crunch between the shoulders. But, oh, the weariness of lifting knees only to put them down again! She cheated when the second time came round. When it was done, Mrs. Caldecot felt righteous; she concluded that she deserved to put on the dressing-gown again, that the glow was a proper reward, and that now at last might she sit down at her toilet table and light her second cigarette. As she puffed she thought with melancholy that though the second cigarette was good, it was not quite so potent as the one had with the early cup of tea, when one was not quite awake, and the tiny whiff of nicotine enabled one to put off, just for another moment, the compulsion of wakefulness. "I suppose," she thought, "that it's like everything, and that the second cigarette is never quite so good as the first." Then she chid herself: Some things were quite as good the second time as the first. They endured forever. But did they? And suddenly, as if this disturbed her more than she cared to own, as if Mrs. Caldecot were not in the mood to consider the mutability of pleasures, she put the cigarette down and seized her manicure scissors, as if to force herself, first seeking some tiny tongue of cuticle to clip, equalizing a coral finger-nail, or with an ivory stub developing a half-moon, and bringing out with polish the familiar glows of her fingers. For a long time she massaged

the skin of her face and neck, lightly rubbing in cold cream. She did not know why, but she developed a little obstinacy of operation on either side of her mouth. Then, with half-conscious hurry, she busily dabbed a powder puff over the creamy surface, from chin to roots of hair, as if she veiled herself.

She was very beautiful at that moment. Her released, almost black hair was thrown away, thick and glossy, from her exaggeratedly broad, low brow. Wholly black and nearly level brows hung over two slate-gray eyes, which lay far apart about the slightly arched nose with the rather broad, disdainful nostrils. She liked her fastidious nose, and she enjoyed the repetition of its effect in the mouth, where the upper lip was thick and greedy, the lower lip rather thin and ready to tremble, except when controlled by the even and very sharp teeth. She had a certain splendor as she so lay back, the screaming blue and silver of the dressing-gown fallen from the massive contour of her shoulders. For a moment she so considered herself, hands outstretched upon the glass cover of the dressing table, large, slender hands with well-parted fingers. So she stayed for some time, and did not know quite what she thought, except that a certain sadness and anxiety translated itself into this thought: I'd better hurry up and dress. So a little bored, she brushed her hair for a while, enjoying at intervals the flashes which here and there

the electric light brought out. Rather wearily, she put it up, to feel relief when she had finished the task so often accomplished. And she had a satisfaction almost of sensuality when, for a moment, she hesitated before the drawer where she might choose the underclothes of the day. Claire Caldecot loved underclothes. She practically collected them. There were chemises of crêpe de Chine, hardly bluer than the morning sky in springtime; nightgowns of innocent lawn, bearing tiny yokes of Mechlin lace; brassieres like cobwebs of rose silk; and, at the side, a sumptuous, disordered heap of garments of ninon, shell pink or straw yellow, of rather heavy champagne silk, or sea-green milanese. Here and there a scarlet shoulder strap, or a ribbon of black and gold, brought out the delicacy of the colors. Folded upon the top lay a short petticoat of very old amber silk, heavily flowered in formal garlands of purple, crimson, and emerald flowers.

Mrs. Caldecot remained for a moment stooping over the drawer from which rose the suave, discreet emanation of cleanliness that knows research, the scent of the delicate fabrics themselves, with which mingled the memory of a more acrid perfume. Of a love perfume that would not die. When at last she had chosen, when she had concealed the sweet intimacy of these impalpables under the severe sweater which the country dictates, the equally conventional tweed skirt that falls in lines stiff as cardboard, put down with a sigh the rainbow array of her silk

stockings, and chosen sepia ribbed cashmere, to go with her brown brogues, and was ready, she did not at once go downstairs. She went to the window to look out toward the hanger. She could hardly see it now, for the rain was slowly thickening its smoky veil. She listened to the slight noises of the house, the trickle of water from a gutter, the distant bark of a dog; now and then, from the servants' quarters, came the discord of a laugh. She stood so, with a hand against the window frame, and, as the seconds passed, her eyes ceased to see the prospect before her. At that moment she was in a disturbed mood, and she did not quite know what disturbed her. First she thought of Patricia Neale.

Patricia was a nice girl, a pretty girl. Something innocent and undeliberate about her. As Mrs. Caldecot considered the bright exuberance of the girl, she had a moment of envy. Patricia Neale at twenty, or twenty-one perhaps, seemed to have come out of the Everywhere into Here with simple gusto. She liked games; she enjoyed parties; she loved to talk; she didn't mind listening. Everything was lovely, everything new. Everything exciting and everybody charming. Mrs. Caldecot smiled rather bitterly as she remembered that the night before the girl had won her with unintentional flattery by getting her to explain the exact guard in a nonheaded suit for a retorting no-trump declaration. She had said so prettily: "It does seem so silly to me, but it looks as if I had such a lot of

things to learn." Which conveyed the unconscious flattery that Mrs. Caldecot had nothing to learn, and that Patricia did not condole with her because she was experienced and presumably aged; that Patricia really envied and admired this beautiful woman who knew not only the secrets of bridge, but the deeper secrets of ruling hair in a high wind, and of touching ink, yet not being defiled. Mrs. Caldecot felt that one could not help liking Patricia. She was one of those women who appreciate beauty in other women: she was herself beautiful enough for that. So she liked the mental picture she now made of Patricia, her small, round, curly head, and the undeveloped grace of her drooping shoulders and narrow flanks. One became friendly with her easily, for she gave herself, and now, after a week at Cantrel Court, Mrs. Caldecot felt that she knew the little that was to be discovered in Patricia's half-sketched dreams and untouched emotions. It was not wonderful that Bob should like her too, though Mrs. Caldecot could not help wishing that Bob had not greeted the girl like an old friend. It was true that he had met her before, at some party in London, when she was up from Devonshire, but, all the same, he seemed pleased in his surprise, and Mrs. Caldecot wished that he had been . . . surprised in his pleasure. Oh, she had nothing against Bob. He'd been as he always was, charming, companionable, and so reassuring. No, it wasn't that he'd played fives with the girl when she thought that

he disliked the elementary and overheating game. She hated games herself, and Bob had to get his exercise somehow. Still . . . it was just . . . well, still. And the party had got scattered the other day, when they went to Basingalton to see the Elizabethan houses. The two hadn't gone out of sight, but they'd been, in a way, apart. At one moment, in the High Street, they'd been fifty paces behind, and a peculiarly delicate feminine instinct told Mrs. Caldecot that when people are fifty paces behind they are far enough away to confide, without it being possible to say that they are sharing a secret. If people were a mile off, they might maintain innocence; the necessity of keeping out of earshot altered the relationship.

"Don't be absurd," she said aloud to herself. "If you go on like this you'll become a jealous woman." She saw herself with affright a woman reaching middle age and holding on by activity to a bliss which she had gained by passivity, become grasping where she had been seductive, suspicious where she had been trusting, and defeated where she had been predominant. What reason had she to suspect Bob? Would it not have been much more suspicious if he had ostentatiously avoided Patricia? Would not a guilty man have made some clumsy attempt at concealment by disparaging the girl? Called her raw, country-bred, all the things she was? and hiding within the keep of his mind the impression made by her evident charm. At least Bob would have done

that, being such a fool with women, and a darling and thinking one could take them in. Oh, it was awful to love a man like this. She had a memory of Rodbourne the day before. He was driving the car and wore no goggles, she suspected out of coquetry. The elegance of his tall body was not concealed, for again out of coquetry he wore leather and not furs. He looked exactly like a chauffeur, the sort of chauffeur whom Aphrodite would engage, with his straight features, his dark-lashed blue eyes, and the little mustache of red-gold on his ruddy face. Elegant, but not effeminate; the sharp, bony point of his chin guarded him against that. Would it be so wonderful, Mrs. Caldecot thought, if Patricia were to fall in love with this man? Not only his good looks, but the steady, intelligent speech, the young parliamentary reputation, the air of strength and determination? And would it be so wonderful if this man of thirty-eight, still young, but aware of age, were tempted by the shy challenge of a youthful passion, by the opportunity to initiate, to exchange his relationship with her, where he was an equal, where he was perhaps a child, for one where he would be a god? To be a wonder instead of being a delight, what a temptation for the vain creature that is man!

With an effort Mrs. Caldecot threw aside these ideas and told herself that time would show, hoping as she formulated the thought that time would show nothing. She was disquieted because for some un-

known reason Bob had not that morning made upon the wall the usual signal to announce that when no one was about he would take the opportunity to pay an early call. She missed that. She loved those secret meetings in the early morning, when she had had breakfast, had done her hair and powdered, and for a while was placid and idle. Then Bob would come in, rather cautious, though assured, kiss her, almost conjugally sit down, tell her the contents of some of his letters. The newspaper would be lying open, and she would have read it by then, but Bob would all the same tell her what there was in it, and his male intelligence would make public affairs a little clearer to her mind. He would sit there and enjoy the appreciation in her eyes, in those eyes which so punctually, and almost truthfully, said: "Bob, how clever you are!"

Why didn't he come? Didn't he want to? Absurd! If he didn't want to he'd have come all the more, because he'd think he ought to, men being so beastly conventional. "Perhaps," thought Mrs. Caldecot, as she tortured a stiff pleat on her skirt, "perhaps the servants were about." But why didn't he at least tap? Mrs. Caldecot stood for a moment staring at the patterned wall. Nothing. She couldn't stay there all the morning, waiting. Probably he'd gone downstairs. Well, she'd better go down too. For a moment she looked about the room, uncertain until her eyes met their curiously strained reflection in the mirror. They stood star-

ing at each other for a moment, the woman and her ghost, as if the woman were afraid to draw near, yet could not get away. Then, step by step, she went closer to the mirror, and closer, until her hands rested upon the dressing table. They so stood, their gaze unchanged, the one pitiless, the other imploring.

"Yes," thought Mrs. Caldecot, "I'm all right." But still she stared into the mirror. The skin looked to-day unpleasantly drawn about the orbits. In spite of powder, it shone there, as if a little of the flesh had fallen away. And the cheeks too. She always had fine, hard cheeks that Bob liked to pinch. Why did they look so outlined to-day? They weren't swollen. No, it wasn't that. It was that . . . what was that below the cheeks? It had looked like a shadow once, and now it affirmed itself. Almost imperceptibly, if she stood sideways, the cheek hung. And those other shadows, on either side of the mouth. . . . In a moment of revolt Mrs. Caldecot thought: "I'm not wrinkled." No, it wasn't wrinkles, but those shadows which surrounded the mouth seemed to have deepened lately. They were prolonging the lips and produced the illusion that the corners were being drawn down. About the jaw, too, that had been clean as if cut in marble, there was a sort of uncertainty of contour. A thickening, a slackening of flesh, beginning gently by the ear, and slowly swelling into a fullness at the throat, which now lacked hardness of line, that re-

sisted ill the inquisitorial finger with which she tested its flaccidity. Mrs. Caldecot knew all this, and did not know it. The face which had stared at her every day, she knew it too well to mark its change, but she was conscious of it all the same, conscious enough to know that if it had not changed, still change was upon it. She had a sudden vision of herself, dim-eyed, with rare eyelashes, retracted lips, a parched and mottled skin, upon which heavy cream would with difficulty hold reluctant floury patches, with pendulous chin and a rolling neck, and all this which had been lovely and imperious draped with the dry and quivering rags of dead skin and lax flesh.

She turned away hurriedly from the awful trial where she, prisoner in the dock, and for life, had to consent to her own arrest, against herself bear witness, upon herself pass sentence. She stood in the middle of the room, her trembling hands raised as if she sought some rescue, some reassurance. She couldn't stay like this, self-convicted and alone; it couldn't be true. Oh, it wasn't true! But how was she to know? How could she believe in her eternal youth, in her untouched beauty, unless she were again assured of it? "A woman," she thought, "is not beautiful until a man tells her that she is." Still she was staring at the flowered wall. Still no sound. Perhaps he was asleep. She took a step forward, then hesitated. Never had it been she who tapped upon the wall. Never had she done

more than turn a desirous ear toward the melody. Sometimes she had amused herself by pretending not to hear, and so exacted tribute by making him persist. No, she couldn't tap. That would be confession. But she was so sad, so alone.

"I must do it," she thought. She was so frightened.

At last, with a sudden gesture of abdication, Mrs. Caldecot went to the wall, and with trembling fingers tapped out the accustomed signal, one bar of the Greek dance in "Alceste." She tapped it to the end, uncertainly, and every tap hurt something in her; it was as if she nailed a living creature upon that wall. When she had finished she waited for a moment. There was no reply. With new humility she said to herself, "Perhaps I didn't tap loud enough." So now once more, and resolutely, she tapped out the measure. And when that was done, now without hesitation, she tapped again, until her finger nails ached, and again, her eyes fixed upon a twinkling rose in the pattern. And again the eternal tripping measure, until at last she found tears rush from her eyes, and she was biting her lips to keep down her screams, as now no longer she tapped, but beat at the wall, with both fists raised above her head, striking at that neutral surface to force it to yield a reply, while long convulsive shudders went through the whole of her body. She struck on, animated now only to effort, as if become a disembodied force of desire and despair.

CHAPTER III

MACKEREL SKY

STANDING in the doorway of the drawing-room, Mrs. Caldecot for a moment watched Mrs. Headcorn with a certain amusement. Her buxom hostess was still engaged in her morning tour of the furniture; this she looked upon as an essential part of housekeeping. At that moment, she stood before the Sheraton cabinet, forefinger upraised upon a panel. She did not move, and Mrs. Caldecot had to bite her lip so as not to laugh. She knew exactly what was occupying the mind of her old friend. May Headcorn, inflamed with the spirit of a grandmother who had no servant troubles, wanted on the panel to trace the word "dust." And she was telling herself: "After all, if there's dust they ought to know it. I'm not going to be bullied by my servants. If only it were Hilda, I'd do it." The forefinger trembled and made a dab at the panel. The train of thought was resumed: "Alice is such a disagreeable girl. And I'm sure Booker makes all the trouble she can." Then, happening to turn her head, Mrs. Headcorn perceived Mrs. Caldecot in the doorway, and adopted her arrival

as a pretext, enabling her to forget a duty that might have had unpleasant domestic results.

"Oh, my dear," she cried, "how lovely you look."

"Do I?" said Mrs. Caldecot, a little weakly. "How nice of you to say so. Women don't say those things as a rule, May."

"Except fat old women like me," said Mrs. Headcorn.

"Oh, you aren't old."

"But I'm fat. Ah! Claire, I don't know how you've kept your figure?" She came a little closer: "You know, you're wonderful."

"Be careful, May. Don't overdo it. When one's told that one is wonderful, one knows that one's wonderful for one's age. First one's beautiful, and then one's wonderful. It's an insufficient compensation."

"My dear!" said Mrs. Headcorn, her pink curves expressing as much concern as could be hoped of them. "What's the matter? You sound so bitter."

"Bitter? Dear, me, no. What's put that into your head, May?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm stupid, that's why you're fond of me, I suppose, but I'm not so stupid as you think. And just because I say you look pretty, and you do! How lucky you are to carry your complexion in a little pot instead of being pink all the time like me. Oh, don't be nasty, Claire. I don't know why, but you're one of the few people who can upset me. You used to do it at school, when you were twelve and I was eighteen."

Mrs. Caldecot affectionately laid an arm round the large shoulder of her friend: "Don't be absurd! You're a brick. And don't quarrel with me about nothing. Remember what I am when I'm roused."

Mrs. Headcorn laughed: "No, I won't quarrel with you. I've trouble enough this morning."

"What's the matter? One of the Apostle spoons left unpolished?" asked Mrs. Caldecot with amiable sarcasm.

"No, it's Booker. Oh, Claire, you don't know how lucky you are not to have a maid."

"I should have thought it was very nice to have some one to do your hair for you, and set out your clothes. . . ."

"That part's all right. Only when a maid's useless she's a nuisance, and when a maid's useful she's a tyrant."

"Bravo! May. You make epigrams unawares. Or things that sound like them until you think them over."

"She was hammering a nail in with the brass pot that Charlie brought back from Bangalore. I caught her in the act."

"Dear me! Did she damage the nail?"

"Don't be absurd. Booker does what she likes in this house, and she and I don't always agree. Still she does bring me the news. She always knows the worst about everybody."

"What is the news?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, lan-

guidly, as Mrs. Headcorn picked up a saucer filled with pieces of orange, and they moved toward the aviary.

"Oh, nothing," said Mrs. Headcorn, "except that Bessie Chale is marrying an American. They say he's frightfully rich, but it won't matter since they're going to live in California."

"Is he nice?"

"I've only seen him once. He treated me as if I was nineteen. If I were Bessie, I'd be careful. Men who're as nice as that, they can't be like it inside. And, Claire, do you know, old Lord Niton has been deserted by all the servants at five minutes' notice. And would you believe it, he says he's declared war, and is blacking his own boots, and frying eggs in his kitchen, and he swears he'll never have the place cleaned again. Not that that would make much difference. Poor old fellow, I'm sorry for him. He's been wanting to marry Mrs. St. Lawrence, you know, the red-haired woman, for years. She might have done it if it hadn't been for Dickey Altrincham."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, flickering into interest. "Is it really improving?"

"Oh, you scandalmonger!"

"My dear girl, if you stay here a little longer, you'll see that things about Mrs. St. Lawrence don't need proving. Bless her! And Altrincham is such a changed man. Once upon a time he didn't know what to do with himself. He couldn't hunt seven

days a week. Now she's interested him in Russian ballet."

"So far as I can remember Dicky," said Mrs. Caldecot, "there are things in the Russian Ballet that might interest him."

"I don't mean what you mean, but what does it matter? Mrs. St. Lawrence is happy, and Dickey's happy and Cicely Altrincham doesn't know, and there you are."

Mrs. Caldecot laughed: "My dear May, you know, you're perfectly immoral."

"How do you mean, immoral?" asked Mrs. Headcorn, hotly.

"Well, you tell me this sort of thing with what some people would call 'beautiful charity,' and other people 'scandalous lack of proper feeling.' You don't seem to think there's anything wrong in it, or exciting in it, or any of that. You discuss that sort of thing as if it were an interesting item out of the garden notes in the newspaper."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Headcorn, "if one was to begin to bother about things being right and wrong, one would never be done. What with my household . . . and all that, if people keep decently quiet and know how to make themselves happy, if I don't like 'em, I say let 'em because I don't know 'em, and if I do like 'em I still say let 'em because I like 'em."

For a moment Mrs. Caldecot said nothing. With trembling fingers she held up a fragment of orange to the contemptuous bill of Kitchener, the youngest

of the cockatoos. But at last she put it down, laid a hand on Mrs. Headcorn's arm and said: "You are a dear, you know. You're so straight yourself, and yet you don't mind other people being . . . weak. I don't mean weak exactly, but not like you."

"Don't you worry about me," said Mrs. Headcorn, crossly. "I've had my romances."

"Have you? You never told me."

"Oh, well. . . ." She flushed faintly. "They didn't come to anything."

Mrs. Caldecot laughed: "Happy May! Perhaps it may be best really that romances shouldn't come to anything. So don't let's even talk about romances; let's talk of something else. I love being here. I'm always happy here, and it's so sweet of you to have asked Bob."

"Well," said Mrs. Headcorn, ingenuously, "most people do ask you together."

Mrs. Caldecot turned away her head: "Oh, my dear, really! You know you've got the tact of an elephant."

"What do I want tact for?" asked Mrs. Headcorn. "I'm your greatest friend, aren't I?"

"Yes, I know. Still, don't put it like that. You embarrass me."

"Oh, dear! Oh dear! Claire, don't look like a dying duck in a thunderstorm. Bob's in love with you, and you're in love with him, and I'm very fond of both of you, so I ask you to stay here together. There's nothing to make a fuss about."

"All right, I own up. But for heaven's sake, May, don't rub it in."

There was silence for a moment or two, during which the cockatoos were at last persuaded to accept the quarters of orange, for they realized that until they emptied the saucer, these irritating women would continue to push the fruit into their faces, while Chang and Suki would persist in standing against the perches with an air of appetite. Then, while she tickled the aged Jimmy behind his untidy ruff, Mrs. Caldecot, looking away, said: "Do you know, May, this is the first time we've talked about . . . and I've known you since I was seven. . . . well, you know, about Bob and me, and yet you've known all about it. How is it you've never asked me anything about it?"

"Why should I since I knew?"

"I suppose Booker told you," said Mrs. Caldecot, suddenly savage.

"No," said Mrs. Headcorn, reflectively, "Booker didn't tell me. She may know, of course. She does generally. But then, you know, it started such a long time before I got Booker, and nowadays you aren't very noticeable."

"Thank you."

"It isn't like in the beginning. I remember, after Geoffrey went away, I wondered who you'd take up with."

"Oh? You didn't see me in the part of the deserted wife, lonely and dignified?"

"No. I thought you'd be dignified all right, but you were too pretty to be lonely. I thought it was going to be Stephen Britford."

"Old Stephen! Oh, May, I've better taste than that."

"Well, he was frightfully faithful. First he wanted to marry you, and then he came to your wedding and was a pal of Geoffrey's and when Geoffrey went Stephen was still there."

"He still is."

"And always will be. You'll never get rid of Stephen."

"But how did you come to think. . . . But what made you think it was Bob?"

"I wasn't sure at first. It was after Geoffrey had been gone three years, I think. Don't you remember the night you came into my box at the opera? It was the first time you heard 'La Bohème.'"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I had my suspicions of Bob before then, and that evening he came in between the acts and sat with us. Then he told us a story about a butler. Now he had told us both together that same story a month or two before."

"I don't remember. But suppose he did?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, lightly.

"You laughed. Laughed, as if you'd never heard such a funny story before."

"Oh, surely that wasn't enough to convict him?"

"Perhaps not, though it's suspicious when a

woman laughs at a man's old story. But it got much more suspicious. Don't you remember you said: 'Oh, Mr. Rodbourne, do tell Mrs. Headcorn that other story about the barber. You know, the story your old man in Bond Street told you!" And he did. Don't look at me with eyes like saucers. I may be stupid, but I know when a woman's showing off a man to her friends. You were proud of him, Claire; you wanted to show me how delightful and amusing he was; you wanted him to make an impression on me. Is it true?"

"Yes, it's true. And you never said anything! Never made a comment; never dragged confidences out of me."

Mrs. Headcorn did not reply, and Mrs. Caldecot realized better than ever the beautiful simplicity of her friend. Erratic, muddle-headed, sagacious only at intervals, she had a magnificent capacity for absorbing things as they were and treating them as they are. Her spirit had a splendid digestion.

"You see," said Mrs. Headcorn, "I look upon him as your husband."

"So do I. And yet he can never be that."

At that moment, the two Pekingese, by scratching at the aviary door, suggested that they had had enough of the cockatoos. As if thinking of something else, Mrs. Headcorn opened the door, upon which Chang and Suki stared at the opening with the catlike air of offense which characterizes these dogs, and looked up at her as if asking why ever

she should have done this. But the opening of the door had a reflex influence upon her, and she went into the drawing-room, still carrying before her the saucer containing the remains of the orange. Mrs. Caldecot had to smile as her friend first put it down upon a mahogany table, then picked it up, and with her blue linen skirt wiped moisture from the precious wood. "Dear old May," thought Mrs. Caldecot, "she's found out how to live, loving all sorts of nice things made of wood and china, which always remain the same." She watched her tolerantly, envying that fussy little brain so entirely preoccupied with sticks and stones that nothing could make into men. Then, as often happens between friends, Mrs. Caldecot was surprised, for Mrs. Headcorn suddenly turned and said, "Why not?"

"How? Why not? What?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, putting down the *Times* which she had just taken up.

"How do you mean, you can never marry Bob? Suppose Geoffrey died?"

"Yes, of course. If he did die. But men like Geoffrey, they live hard and they die hard. He'll live long enough to do me out of Bob anyway."

"Claire!" said Mrs. Headcorn, rather shocked. "You don't mean to say you think that if Geoffrey were to live until you were . . . fifty, Bob wouldn't marry you."

"Of course he would, if I would."

"You wouldn't!" cried Mrs. Headcorn, horrified.

"Of course I wouldn't after we'd . . . after so many years. I'd know he wouldn't really want to; he'd be an old bachelor then, and I an unmaidenly old maid. He'd ask me because it was the thing to do, and I'd refuse him for his own good. After that I'd marry him. Women are awful fools at fifty. We don't begin to know anything about romance until we're forty. So cheer up, May; your time's coming."

Mrs. Headcorn refused to be turned aside by suggestions of romances for herself. She became practical: "I say, isn't there a law or something that says that if some one hasn't been seen for seven years you can promote their death?"

"'Presume,' darling, not 'promote,' however attractive the idea may be. Oh, I know all about that. I've been to see my solicitors about it, and sat there hours staring at black japanned boxes, until I know the names on them: 'Exors of Lafcadio Jones' is a pal of mine by now."

"And what did the solicitor say?"

"He said as you do. It can be done if the person hasn't been heard of. Only, if he comes back, and one's married again. . . ."

"Bigamy?" said Mrs. Headcorn, feeling that it would be awful and lovely.

"Not exactly bigamy. Only legal bigamy. But it would be very difficult to explain in society. Besides, you know, it can't be done for another

reason. Geoffrey has been heard of. Geoffrey isn't dead."

"How do you know?"

"Well, Geoffrey never led a quiet life, as you may remember. About ten years ago some one saw him at Monte Carlo, and was even introduced to one of the ladies he calls Mrs. Caldecot."

"Well, that's ten years, not seven," said Mrs. Headcorn, still practical.

"Sorry, May, but about four years ago Geoffrey was in New York, and signalized the occasion by assaulting a man in a bar, and got fined. The newspapers took it up because Geoffrey made an eloquent speech in court, in which he described the affair as a prelude to Prohibition. A kind friend sent me a cutting with Geoffrey's photograph. It was very like him, but more so. Oh, don't make me talk about him like that, May; you make me so hard. I don't want to be bitter to him. Poor old Geoff, he can't die just to please me."

"What I can't . . . for . . . understand . . . fffu," said Mrs. Headcorn, as she blew upon the silver ash tray which resisted polish, "is how he came to leave you."

Mrs. Caldecot did not at once reply. She did not like that. She did not mind Mrs. Headcorn talking about her present condition, but she was feminine enough to dislike being plainly told that she had been left, that she had failed to hold. She was a true woman, and she would have felt insulted

if she had been rejected by a boa constrictor. So she evaded: "Men are like that."

"Not with women like you," said Mrs. Headcorn, so hotly that she dispelled the offense. "What Geoffrey could have been thinking of to leave the most beautiful woman in London, the wittiest, the smartest. . . ."

"That'll do, May. Keep all that for your young man."

"Well, I mean it. And he'd only been married two or three years."

"Yes, he said something about that before going, and remarked that it had felt more like three lives than three years, and that as he wasn't a cat he couldn't spare me any more lives. I didn't mind that; it made me giggle a little. Geoffrey always had a ready tongue. Poor old Geoff, perhaps I was rather difficult. You see, I was twenty-two, and in those days, as you know, twenty-two was twenty-two, instead of being eighty-nine as it is now. Geoff was so handsome, and so dashing."

"Yes, he was all that. I rather fancied him myself, you know, Claire. A good thing I didn't get him."

"Thank you. The elephant resumes its pawing, dear May. But you're right. I was such a rigid sort of child. And Geoff reminded me of the hero in *Under Two Flags*. Mamma never let me read any novels except those which had been found safe in her time. He was just like that, with a modern

touch, the Oscar Wilde drawing-room touch. That's what I called modern. And he was to be the hero, and I his *vivandière*. I knew that he drank a little too much, but Mamma said that men were a crude and brutal sex, which, however, must be pursued because it was noble and brave. So I said I'd reform him. I tried. If I hadn't tried, if I'd indulged him, he might be here now."

"You don't regret him?"

"Of course not. But I'm a little ashamed of myself. I'm afraid I gave him such a just-so life, with exactly the right number of servants for the house, soup, fish, entrée, joint, sweet, savory, as done in the period, and at the right hour. Riviera in the winter, Scotland in the summer, everything just so. I didn't like women who put anything on their face. Geoff did, and as I didn't ask them to the house, he got them outside. And we had an awful row because I went with somebody to the Court Theater to see a play of Bernard Shaw's; when I talked about it, Geoff said I was putting on side. And so I was, May. I bored him."

"Never! Not with those eyes."

"Oh, you baby! Men get tired of our eyes and the rest. All that beauty of the body, it's only meant to get the man to hang on with you long enough to get used to you, fond of you, if you like. And ten years later he's forgotten the color of your eyes, but he buys you spectacles."

"You're rather cynical. After all, you're all

right; you've got Bob. I don't see why you should be so hard."

"I'm not, really, except when I think of that time. Sixteen years ago. It's always agony to think of sixteen years ago. One wants to get back there, with all the advantages one had, and with all the experiences that one has gained by sacrificing them. One can't. That's what makes one hard. I'm one of the women who got soft too late. We all do. But," and an inflection of triumph came into Mrs. Caldecot's voice, "I did try with Bob, and I have made something of it. It's nice to be able to talk to you, May, because you don't seem to think any the worse of me. After all, from your point of view as a respectable woman, I'm a bad wife. I married Geoff for better, for worse, and what I ought to have done was to do nothing. Or try to help him. I shouldn't wonder if at the back of your mind you didn't disapprove of me just a little bit."

"Not at all."

"Oh? Then you must be envious."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Headcorn, flushing. "I don't see why I've got to be one or the other. Of course, I was so happy with Charlie that I don't suppose I understand. Mind you, Claire, Charlie wasn't perfect either. India upset his health a lot, and at one time he started reading *Plain Tales from the Hills*, and he started a plain tale by himself."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Caldecot, very interested. "And what did you do?"

"Oh, I sent her a couple of return tickets, because Charlie was always so careless and lost his purse."

"And they came back by the next train?" cried Mrs. Caldecot.

"Yes. How did you know? I suppose you guessed, but I didn't think that would happen. I'm so innocent."

"You're a darling," said Mrs. Caldecot. "You're a rare thing: a really good woman, which is another way of saying you've got no morals."

"Well, I never heard it put like that," said Mrs. Headcorn, thoughtfully. "I suppose I haven't got any morals in the way people mean it. I mean to say, having morals means that you don't think other people have any, isn't that it? Though it doesn't matter. What I say is this: In life one must do what one can, and most of the time one can't."

"It's something like that," said Mrs. Caldecot. "One gets carried away. You know, Geoff hadn't gone five years before Bob . . . before it began. And for two years he'd been following me about and asking me to run away with him, and silly things like that; lovely, silly things. One always wants to do silly things when one's in love; it's the thing to do then. And I was always telling him that he'd get tired of me, and he got absurd, asked if I minded his arranging to have Geoff shot quietly.

You know, I'm not quite sure it wasn't that got me round. There's something perfectly ridiculous in Bob, a touch of the Middle Ages. He really set to work with an agency to find Geoff; and he came and saw me every day, saying that when they'd found Geoff they'd wait till he got to Italy or Spain, where they did those things discreetly and cheaply. I was horrified. For one moment it was awful, because the agency thought they found Geoffrey at Nice, and Bob came along with a sham letter, supposed to be written by an Italian princess, which was to lure Geoff into the land of efficient modern murder."

Mrs. Headcorn laughed: "Absolutely Drury Lane."

"Absolutely. It was exactly what I needed. If only Bob had been able to hang a silken ladder to my window . . . I'd have opened it. Only Seville Street is a rotten place for that sort of thing. I ought to have gone to Hampstead."

"You mean it was an adventure."

"Yes. It was still *Under Two Flags*, but there was something else."

"What?"

"Oh, May, don't think so slowly and say 'what.' You've nearly prevented me telling you. How can I tell you the truth if you ask for it? Still, curl up your trunk and let me talk. You know Bob's success in Parliament, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Headcorn. "Everybody says

he was a fool not to take the undersecretaryship they offered him. I say that for a young man of thirty-eight. . . ."

"I know all about that," said Mrs. Caldecot. "If he'd taken it they'd have left him there. Whereas now he's in danger, or at least a complication, and after being annoyed with him they'll have to give him. . . ." She stopped, as if afraid of saying too much. "Anyhow, he wasn't a success then. He'd been overlooked. Bob found things too easy, you know. He had enough money to do what he liked, and within six months of being called to the bar, at twenty-four, he won East Farnshire easily. And he began. I didn't know him then, but I looked up the speech. You don't remember the speech, do you May?"

"No. Go on."

"Well, he made a sensation. In his maiden speech, which took only half an hour to deliver, there were twenty-nine epigrams. He nearly created a riot in the House. After the first five minutes, members were sending out for their friends from the smoking-room to come and hear the performance. He'd worked it up with a man on the other side. They'd been collecting epigrams since their first year at Oxford; that afternoon they shared. Well, Bob was a sensation. He lasted the time of one morning paper, two afternoon papers, to say nothing of echoes in the weeklies for a while. Everybody said that he was the coming man, which was another

way of saying that he'd come to nothing. He had a splendid first session. Then he had a session much like the first; and another. And another. Nothing seemed to happen. There was another election and he got in again, and nothing happened."

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Headcorn.

"No, don't you see. He made his effect too soon. They got used to him, and, by degrees, the Speaker ceased to see him as often as he used to. And Bob didn't get put on to committees and Royal Commissions. He was treading water, and he might have gone on doing that to the end of his life. When I met him he was nearly thirty. Oh, May, it was dreadful."

"Really," said Mrs. Headcorn, "I'm glad I've nothing to do with politics, I can't understand how a man can be ruined by being brilliant."

"Easily, in England. But that's not the question. When I started taking an interest in Bob it was like this: After a fantastic two years, during which Bob was the white hope of the party, whatever a white hope may be, he told me, but I've forgotten, he had the most terrific time. He seconded the address, he was twenty years younger than the youngest member on the War Office Departmental Committee, and from all over the country came requests that he should speak at big meetings. They wanted him over in Manchester. It was a great compliment for a Home Counties member. Then, well, how's one to explain? he got on, and he didn't.

Five years later he was still being asked to speak, one day at a big Federation meeting, but on another occasion some silly local association had the cheek to offer him his railway fare. And lots of big shows left him out. I don't suppose you quite understand what that means, May, but the man who seconded the address was not asked to move or even second an amendment when his side went out of office."

"No," said Mrs. Headcorn, "I don't understand. I suppose it was disagreeable. Why did it happen?"

Mrs. Caldecot made a vague gesture: "How does one know? How can one explain why a man makes a brilliant start and somehow doesn't satisfy his promises? I suppose people got used to him, and his brilliancy carried him away. You see, Bob's too brilliant. Whether the subject is Ireland, quarries, or treasury bills, he's always got something sensible and clever to say. They knew he was right, and they hated him because he was so versatile. Oh, I've thought about this so much. In this country, they like a Jack-Of-No-Trade, rather than a Jack-Of-All. Things happened vaguely; his mail grew less; sometimes the newspapers referred to him as one of the most promising men in his party, and sometimes they made another list . . . of junior members. He was stale."

"I suppose he was very unhappy," said Mrs. Headcorn.

"Yes. It was awful. He saw things pretty

clearly, you know. He realized that if something didn't happen he'd remain a brilliant free lance, and he would have no precise reputation for anything. He was in despair. He doubted himself. I remember the first time we talked about it. He said to me: 'I'm too clever; I haven't got the blindness to everything but one subject that gets a man so trusted that they listen to him on the questions he's blind to. I ought to specialize on concrete. Fill my head with concrete. The British public prefers heads filled with concrete to heads filled with abstract. They're harder. They're useful against brick walls, if only to break on them.' And he didn't know how to get out; he was doing too many things, harboring too many ideas. He was working himself to a shadow, and he wouldn't let go of anything, and . . . I loved him so."

Mrs. Headcorn looked up, for this was too irrelevant even for her.

"Yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, "I think it was that moved me. He was so lost, as well as so wonderful. I wanted to help him; I didn't know how I was going to do it, but somehow I felt I could. Don't think me too noble, May; I don't say that it's out of charity I did this. No, I felt it was going to be the most exciting adventure in the world, to make a man, perhaps to make a power. Oh, I was quite selfish, but there was no harm in it, because he needed me. He'd had such an awful time in so many ways; a girl he'd cared for had broken off

her engagement with him a fortnight before the marriage was supposed to take place, and walked straight from her house to the registrar's and married somebody else. That's why he was drugging himself with politics, and the drug wasn't working because he'd lost himself, because he didn't believe any more in his power, in his reputation, because he was almost getting humble when he compared himself with some stuffed eiderdown on the front bench or some nincompoop journalist with the eggshell still sticking to him. And it was I, oh, I'm proud of it, who changed all that. When I found him, he'd ceased to exist. A year later, quite suddenly, he must have realized it. He said something to me."

"What did he say?"

Mrs. Caldecot hesitated, as if the revelation of this intimacy of the spirit seemed indelicate. Then: "Well, he said to me: 'When we met, I was only a sort of ghost. And now I'm not a man, I'm an act of faith.' He was right, you know, and I loved him for it. It was as if he were my child in a way. He said other lovely things, that men think themselves very grand and important, but that in reality they're only shadows to which the love of women gives a body. You see how it is: he needs me. Oh, I don't want to pretend: I say it again, it was really because I loved him, and not just because I wanted to help him. I remember too well what I suffered during those three years with Geoff. And

the five years after Geoff went away, when I was alone, when I'd got used to being a deserted wife, and made my little circle, and gone back every night to that dear little house, as they call it, and that dear little silent life. Bob changed all that. It was like coming on a torch in a fog. He's given me such heavenly happiness, always, always, even when he was careless in the things he said, as men are when they've a clever tongue, and hurt me, even when he was taken up with some idea and I didn't matter to him more than a bit of furniture. I liked being his bit of furniture. Oh, yes, it's been beautiful, and now . . ." a tone of coldness, almost of despair came into her voice. "Oh, well, I suppose I'd better be happy . . . while it lasts."

Mrs. Headcorn suddenly put down the ash tray. Her blue eyes grew quite round: "How do you mean, Claire? While it lasts?"

For the first time in this intimate conversation Mrs. Caldecot flushed. She looked very beautiful with her pale cheeks so dyed, but the sudden dilation of her eyes belied this air of youth: "Oh, I don't know. Only you see . . . he's younger than me."

"Six months, I believe," said Mrs. Headcorn.

"Yes, six months. Say ten years. I thought you were too conventional, May, to think that a man of thirty-eight and a woman of thirty-eight are of the same age."

"Well," said Mrs. Headcorn, tolerantly, "I know, of course, that men wear better than women."

"Oh, don't be so absurd," said Mrs. Caldecot. "Do you really think I'm thinking about my precious face? Do you think it's my face has held Bob for eight years? No woman's face lasts a man more than a year or two. However beautiful it is, he knows all about it; he may not be sick of it, but he ceases to take an interest in it. So long as one doesn't get repulsive it doesn't matter what one looks like. You may catch a man with your face, but it's with something else you hold him, with charm if you've got any, with interest in his immensely important affairs, by making him feel he's a god, your god, and that nobody understands him like you do. That's what I mean. But it's not that. Bob's younger than me in his mind; even now he'll do dear little schoolboyish things, brag, tell me the terrible revenge he'll take upon some Cabinet Minister, and show off to me when he's rehearsing a speech, glancing at me sideways to see that I'm smiling where required. They all do it, to all women, and he feels superior, and kind, and they love feeling superior. They're babies, all of them, babies of genius sometimes, but babies to the very end. They know all sorts of things we don't: facts, and dates, and how to find one's way in Bradshaw. But they don't understand what they're doing, quite. They live on the top, while we live inside. We don't have ideas, you know."

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Headcorn, offendedly, "that I've got lots of ideas. And so have you. Why, you

explained to me the other day, well, what was it you did explain to me on Tuesday?"

"Trade unionism?"

"There, I knew it was an 'ism. Anyhow, you had lots of ideas about it!"

"Ah," said Mrs. Caldecot, with a sigh, "but that's only froth. In women, the things that really matter are all sorts of buried emotions, enthusiasms for things and people, and unreasonable dislikes, and capacities for sacrificing everything, or being completely beastly, one never knows which. Big, deep, slow, animal things. Men aren't like that, and Bob isn't. He wants his toys, and I'm too old to play with him. Some girl can play with him for a few years, until she grows older than he. I'm not enough, he wants a playmate, not a kindly nursery governess."

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Headcorn, "that I don't know in the least what you're talking about. Why does Bob want a girl when he's got you? And besides, it'll be all right. Mark my words, one of these days Geoffrey'll die, or you'll get a chance to divorce him. Then you can marry Bob and be happy ever after."

Mrs. Caldecot did not reply for a moment. Her hands nervously intertwined. For a moment the unfounded optimism of her friend moved her to believe against all evidence. "Be happy ever after," she thought, and then aloud: "I wonder."

CHAPTER IV

PATRICIA

HER tweed collar turned up, Patricia Neale, golf club in hand, stood in the small room Mr. Headcorn had so placed as to deprive the dining room of light, and which he had in his lifetime described as the Home of Barbarism. Disliking all games, preferring the collection of china and such, Mrs. Headcorn had realized that a man living near Basingalton would have to provide for the violent sporting habits of the country. So the Home of Barbarism contained in a rack a few sporting rifles; fishing rods were stacked in a corner; disused leggings and perforated snowboots were ultimately hidden there. This room, thought Mr. Headcorn, helped to isolate the evil; in a kindly mood, he had decorated it with a series of billiard pictures, comprising "The Kiss," "The Cannon," and so forth.

So it was naturally in the isolation ward reserved for sports that, on this wet morning, Patricia Neale should, with a fluffy ball, be practicing golf swings. She seemed very preoccupied and tenacious. Her little pink lips were seriously compressed as she

slowly swung her club up and down, and fixed upon the ball a gaze that was almost malignant. She was doing rather badly, generally topping the ball. An angry attempt to remedy this fault resulted in driving the fluffy ball between the fishing rods, where for some time Patricia, on her knees, poked and groveled among the stumps at the ball that seemed to tease her. When at last she captured it, she stood for a moment looking about her, so that she might not again lodge it so uncomfortably. She was very charming then in her Harris tweed coat and skirt, where predominated mustard and brown, that caught up the warm lights in her curly, deep-brown hair. She seemed very slight and childish. Her head was almost round, and the effect was accentuated by the close lie of those curly locks. Under highly arched, slightly surprised eyebrows shone rather bright blue eyes that looked at one so directly as to enhance the effect produced by the arched eyebrows. Everything in Patricia contributed to the impression of youth, the small nose with the narrow nostrils that promised coldness disguised by romance, the very small mouth with the pouting roseleaf lips, at most times a little parted and exhibiting the white brilliance of sharp teeth. There was in the mouth some sadness combined with expectancy, as if Patricia doubted herself and covered the doubts with an air of briskness. It was as if she tried to square her firm little chin, to hold up her head on the slim neck where the skin was so

white that one could discern a faint network of blue veins. Drooping shoulders, rather graceful, undeveloped figure that attracted the eye by its delicacy, the long limbs which had not yet filled out, the unmanicured, rather red hands of the country girl, all this contributed to make an appeal. Patricia was so essentially what women call "a little thing," and men "such a little thing."

For some time Patricia perseveringly went on striking at the fluffy ball. She was slicing now, and a certain misery came into her blue eyes. It would have been clear to a sagacious observer that what she was doing was immensely important, that achievement in golf would mean something, procure something. She stopped suddenly, her air of gloom deepened; she put the ball into her pocket, and for a moment stood irresolutely in the middle of the room, idly swinging her club from right to left. Oh, it was a nuisance. She wasn't getting any better. And Mr. Rodbourne had explained to her so perfectly. She wondered why she was so much better with him than she was alone. Of course, he was awfully good, and she supposed that helped. It put one on one's mettle. She knew she ought to try again. He'd think her so silly, and they'd be bound to go round again next day if it cleared up, since the Basingalton links were sand. Then by degrees her thoughts slowly turned away from the game. Her life had been very full this week, and she did not quite know what had filled it. Somehow there was

a difference between this week and her twenty years in a Devonshire village, which had seemed so long; there was something exciting in this visit; it wasn't like other visits which she had paid, or like her stay in London, last year in May. Patricia concluded that it must be because they were such awfully nice people.

A softness came over her as she thought of her fellow guests. It was such a jolly atmosphere. Even mamma, who was rather short-tempered, hadn't gone for her once. Mrs. Headcorn was a dear, though it was awful to think that one might get as fat as that. For a moment Patricia gloomily meditated upon the difference between Mrs. Headcorn to-day and the picture of Mrs. Headcorn as a bride twenty-five years before. One never knew. It was awful. Oh, it must be dreadful, getting old. To think that one day she'd be thirty! Patricia reflected upon what she should do when she was thirty. She expected she'd be married and have a boy at the university. Well, no, not at the university, but at a preparatory school. And give parties to stuffy old gentlemen. And see the children she knew now having all the fun. Thirty! She really would be thirty one day, and call herself twenty-nine. It was awful. Then Patricia remembered Mrs. Caldecot. She supposed Mrs. Caldecot must be thirty, though in the evening she certainly didn't look it. Patricia reflected that Mrs. Caldecot was perfectly charming. She was so beautiful; Patricia

said to herself: "What I can't make out is how she gets those clothes. That frock of hers last night, she got it from the same place as I did when mamma took me uptown. And yet I'm all over hooks and eyes, while she looks as if it was painted on her." Patricia absorbed herself in a girlish brooding. She could not believe that the time would come when her shoulder straps would hold in any attitude, and when her stockings, by some miracle, would never be drawn on sideways. Mrs. Caldecot was like that. How wonderful she was. "Oh," thought Patricia, "I do wish I had gray eyes," and was sad, not knowing that if she'd had gray eyes she'd have wanted blue. "Of course," she reflected revengefully, "she's getting rather stout." But as she was ashamed of her own salt cellars, the idea did not satisfy her. Besides, she wanted no revenge on the older woman, for Mrs. Caldecot interested her intensely. She seemed to know everybody, to play bridge brilliantly, with an air of not caring; she knew how to laugh at herself without looking self-conscious; she was so entirely there, in the picture without knowing it; she didn't seem to have that awful feeling of Patricia's, that everybody in the room had his eyes fixed upon her wrists and feet, and that everybody knew that one of her suspenders was broken and was mended with a safety pin.

But Patricia was generous enough to feel only admiration and not envy. She was at an age when she wanted to worship, and if only Mrs. Caldecot

would let her, and to go to see her when she went up to town, and tell her everything about herself, and shop with her, and perhaps know a little about her. For Patricia felt sure that Mrs. Caldecot must have a story. She was so beautiful, and still was, and hadn't got a husband. No doubt she was a widow, but how was it she hadn't married again? Both men last night, Mr. Rodbourne and a Captain Stanhope, had been very attentive to Mrs. Caldecot, Mr. Rodbourne especially. But then, of course, he was a pal of hers. It would be lovely to be a pal of Mrs. Caldecot's: Patricia envied Rodbourne.

For some unexpressed reason Patricia allowed her mind to dwell on Captain Stanhope rather than on the other man. He really was rather nice, though she wished he wouldn't wear a stock. Too fanciful. Still, he'd made her laugh an awful lot, and she didn't quite know why. But Stanhope was not many years older than she. They were together rather like kittens, and she felt vaguely shy when her thoughts turned toward Rodbourne. She was rather afraid of him, really, a member of Parliament, and everybody said he was awfully clever. Still, he didn't talk cleverly. He only said nice, ordinary things about dogs and the weather. Only he said them in a different way from other people, in a solid sort of way, as if he felt sure of himself. As in the case of Mrs. Caldecot, Patricia felt very small and unformed. Also, his good looks rather disturbed her. She didn't approve of his looks, really,

for she had been brought up to think that when a man is good-looking he must be effeminate. Rodbourne's regular features, his beautiful skin, his height, his broad shoulders, his slim hips, all that struck Patricia as very wonderful but a little too like a fashion plate. It would have been more natural if Rodbourne had looked like the fresh-faced, rather boisterous squarsons of Devonshire, been tweeded and untidy like them, and worn flannel shirts.

An impulse came to Patricia which she at once repressed, having been brought up as a young lady. The night before, when the car crawled home, Rodbourne had insisted on making an appointment with the chauffeur to overhaul it the next morning, much to the annoyance of the chauffeur, but Rodbourne was unmanageably mechanical. Ten o'clock. They'd be at it now. Without telling herself why, Patricia thought steadily about Captain Stanhope, but this did not yield anything very interesting. She was going up to town with Mrs. Neale the day after the next, and wasn't it lovely! she was going to a first night, her first. Patricia looked out of the window where hung the veil of rain, and told herself how lovely it would be, with the stall full of celebrities; that was something. And still the temptation held her; so at last she told herself that she was bored, and that, as she didn't know what to do, she might as well go round to the garage and see if they were having any success with the car. As she

ran round the house, head bent under the rain, she obstinately made herself think that she very much wanted to know whether they could have the car that afternoon. She wanted to go to Burleigh Abbas to . . . to buy a stamp.

She was a little shy as she went, picking between the puddles plots of mud which deceived her feet. It seemed such a forward thing to do. She even paused at the edge of the plantation beyond which lay the garage. The rain fell lightly; for a moment she stood, hand against the slender bole of a young ash, bending forward and withdrawn, her clothes twinkling with raindrops, her face flushed and her eyes wide, upon the end of every stray curl a shining bead of water. She was then concealed and visible between the trees, like a wood nymph that hesitates for a moment between the loneliness of her woods and the dangers of that satyr-haunted open. Then at last, closing her eyes for a second and smiling with a deceptive air of secret understanding, she went with long hoyden strides toward the chauffeur's house and the car under its shanty. For a moment the two men, who had their backs to her, did not notice her, and Patricia was able to watch them, half-shy, half-amused. Rodbourne had taken off his coat and waistcoat and rolled up his sleeves. He looked funny like that, for his hair was ruffled, and she could see that he had been enthusiastic, for the pale blue shirt was stained and streaked with grease. And, as he stood sideways

to her, she saw with an inexplicable little thrill that white forearm, along which ran golden down, was filthy as that of an engine driver. Then the chauffeur perceived her and said: "Good morning, Miss." Rodbourne turned hurriedly, standing arms away from the body, smiling and confused.

It seemed to Patricia then in the immensely short interval between that sight and his first words that a change came over her opinion. In that instant, Rodbourne ceased to be to her the handsome member of Parliament, the impressive, the aloof. He looked ridiculous, so extraordinarily dirty, ashamed of himself, like a small boy who on a Sunday morning has escaped among the coal. She wanted to laugh and, in a funny sort of way, well, not to cry, but her throat swelled in the way it did when she heard big pipes, or the "Marseillaise." She didn't know why, and she hated it, one of those fiery blushes rose up from her body to her hair, burning her, and making her feel dizzy.

Rodbourne did not seem to notice the blush. Apologetically he said: "Good morning. Sorry I can't shake hands," and held out the two infamous greasy objects. "We've had a terrible time, eh, Groby?"

"Yes, sir," said the chauffeur, gloomily. "It wasn't my fault."

"Now, look here," said Rodbourne, turning to him, "don't say that again."

"I wasn't going to say anything, sir, except that

what I said there's nothing wrong with the carburetor, and. . . ."

"Well, there might have been," said Rodbourne.

"You see, Miss," said Groby, who had been fourteen years in Mrs. Headcorn's service, was sorry for everybody, and tolerant of some, "Mr. Rodbourne took the carburetor to pieces. Said the jet was choked up. Of course, I said nothing."

"No, Miss Neale," said Rodbourne. "He didn't say anything, not a word."

"And of course the jet was all right," said the chauffeur, taking no notice.

"Well, we needn't have a catalogue of trouble," said Rodbourne. "Now I've found out that a cylinder's cracked. . . ."

"Yes, sir, I thought as much last night."

Rodbourne stayed with his mouth open, and suddenly Patricia gave a little gurgle which developed into loud laughter. How funny they were, those amateur engineers. Rodbourne looked a little petulant while she laughed. She realized that he didn't quite like it. And she didn't know why, she liked his not liking it. She wanted to tease him.

"Oh, Mr. Rodbourne," she said, "Mamma is really going to buy a car now. She couldn't until now because it would have hurt Alfred's feelings, our old coachman, you know. But he's dead, now. There'll be a nice job in Devonshire for you."

He laughed, and was surprised by a note of sincerity in his voice as he lightly replied: "Sorry,

but I mustn't listen to the voice of Devonshire while the whole country calls me . . . though it doesn't call to me very loud, you know."

"Oh, yes it does," said Patricia. Then, self-conscious, she turned to Groby. "When will you have put it right? If it clears up we want to go to Burleigh Abbas this afternoon."

"I'm afraid you won't get to Burleigh Abbas in this car for a fortnight, Miss. I'm just going to 'phone to the works at Basingalton to have her towed out."

"So the only thing to do," said Rodbourne, "is to wash." He went to a basin fixed into the wall, where the late Mr. Headcorn's ideas of plumbing had produced a tap screwed in the wrong way, so that the more one tried to let out water the more one jammed the tap. This produced a whispered oath which reached Patricia in a queerly intimate way. It made her shy to watch him soaping and sluicing. Somehow it made the bare arms more evident; she felt attracted into an intimacy with him, which embarrassed her in a nice way. He did not hurry over his washing, for fixed above the taps was a fragment of mirror in which now and then, as his head moved, he had a glimpse of Patricia's profile. Somehow she disturbed him. Pretty, of course, very pretty. He discovered himself trying to get a side view of those parted pink lips. Yes, he was right, they did pout. He wondered why this should affect him; she looked sad,

but what should she look sad about at twenty? For Rodbourne had that week become conscious that he was thirty-eight, nearly thirty-nine. He didn't feel middle-aged, and he didn't think he looked it, but still he was what he was, and it must tell on him soon. He'd rather hated Patricia the day before, hated her for being twenty, and ragging with that cub Stanhope. He turned while he dried his hands; they exchanged a few broken sentences, he looking at her boldly, she looking away, or throwing him quick glances through her eyelashes. Then, accidentally, she did something that affected him profoundly. She had both gloved hands in her coat pockets, and as she withdrew a hand the fluffy golf ball came out and dropped into a hollow between two flagstones, where had collected the most infamous liquid results of motor overhauling. "Oh!" cried Patricia, "my ball!" Rodbourne was filled for the first time with the extraordinary pity for women which sometimes comes to men, particularly to those men who have conquered the brilliant and the beautiful. Patricia's cry was like that of a child seeing its toy broken. She looked concerned as over the loss of some precious jewel. So it was unsteadily and hurriedly he replied:

"Never mind, I've got another upstairs," almost as he might have said, as he picked up a baby: "Let Daddy kiss the place and make it well."

This new quality of intimacy remained after he

had put on his coat, as together they ran through the rain toward the house. They had to run, for the rain was increasing in violence; they arrived flushed and a little out of breath, with shining eyes that sought each other's as they went, laughing. Rodbourne felt extraordinarily young that morning after having felt so old. He was exhilarated by some imperceptible cause. The girl's charm, her unpowdered innocence, defined themselves to him. As they went into the house, they were silent, and he was oppressed by the sense of her nearness. His elbow touched hers as he effaced himself at a doorway. The brief contact brought up Patricia to him so vividly as he had seen her in ill-fitting little black frock the night before, looking so small and schoolgirlish with her thin, pretty arms, bony and red at elbow and wrist. She affected him by a sort of freshness, by a lack of preparation. She seemed to him white, and soft, and dewy, like a snowdrop at dawn. There was a little coldness in this attraction, which pleased him, which vaguely challenged him to mute it into ardor. Something so delicate to hold and lead, something so gentle that he vaguely felt he wanted together to cherish and to bruise. But almost at once the memory of Claire came to him. Dear Claire! How lovely she looked the night before. He hadn't been able to go to her that morning because some fool of a housemaid was polishing the parquet outside his door. He wanted to see her. He had several things to tell her, and he

wanted her advice on something. And to hold her big, beautiful hand.

While Patricia watched him, not understanding his faintly worried air, Rodbourne was trying very hard to resist something which did not threaten him yet, which must not be allowed even to threaten him. He was struggling against a temptation which did not quite exist, and in his heart was crying out to Claire to save him from that unknown thing, to protect him against his own disloyalty, just as she had saved him from failure and protected him against folly. He was crying out for her, but, all the same, after a moment, terrified and moved, he was compelled by a force he could not resist to turn and take delight once more in that slight white creature, in whom surely could lie no real danger for the man of the world, especially for a man of honor, who had taken everything from a woman and owed her all he had to give, owed it to her not only in the name of honor, but in the name of love. For he did love Claire, he did.

It was then that Patricia felt awkward with this silent man. In her lifelong surroundings it had always been the custom that when people came together they must talk, never mind what about, but talk. Otherwise there would be awkwardness; if you let other people think, they'd think you were thinking, and that would never do. So she said: "Isn't it awful about the car? Do you really think it'll take a fortnight to put right? Or did Groby only say that to be nasty?"

"I'm afraid he's right."

"Then we shall have to stick in here all day."

"Well, we might go for a walk and change when we got in," said Rodbourne, again feeling disloyal, for he knew that Mrs. Headcorn was too stout and Claire too catlike to go out in the rain.

"But we shouldn't get anywhere," said Patricia querulously. "And the links must be turned into a bog by now. I suppose we shall have to play Patience."

"No," said Rodbourne. "Fact is, I've got some news for you. Mrs. Headcorn, who thinks of everything, has arranged with Booker to set out for us a game called 'darts.' As patented by Cupid. Sounds exciting," he added, feeling clumsy.

"Oh, I know," said Patricia. "You throw the darts into a mat, don't you, and whatever happens, I win a pair of gloves?"

"You've got it exactly," said Rodbourne, and they laughed together as they went toward the garden room, exchanging feeble repartee. They were happy, for behind their poor jests hung all the time a secret conversation: "I like you. . . ." "You're very pretty. . . ." "Do you mind its being wet? . . ." "Rather not."

Indeed, they flung open the door of the garden room with unexpected violence, as it was decided that the first to touch the mat got the first throw, a valuable advantage. Mrs. Headcorn had left the room, intending to overawe the cook, and to fail as

usual to dominate Booker. Mrs. Caldecot sat in an armchair, sometimes looking out into the aviary at the morose Kitchener, at other times as if by an effort, reading a few pages of the novel she held. She had a queer feeling of retraction as the door was flung open and the two ran in, not noticing her, made a rush for the mat, upon which Patricia was first allowed to lay a hand. They looked so light, running like that, laughing; she sprawling in an armchair, felt so heavy. As if she'd got a cap on.

"Oh," cried Rodbourne, noticing her first, "good morning. Please forgive me not noticing you; we were rushing for that mat. Miss Neale has challenged me, and my mind was filled with it."

Mrs. Caldecot only smiled; she could not help feeling that Rodbourne was making conversation, excusing himself overmuch. Indeed, he went on awkwardly: "Well, Miss Neale, you start. I'm afraid it's a tame sort of game."

"Wait and see," cried Patricia, with sudden brilliance, "whether I give you a tame sort of game."

For some time Mrs. Caldecot watched the two, smiling at the childish game, and feeling rather out of it. She didn't say anything during Patricia's atrocious exhibition of marksmanship, and so felt unable to comment on Rodbourne's performance. At the third round, she felt extraordinarily self-conscious, and forced herself to say something. Thus she found herself applauding or deprecating every shot, feeling herself every time more unneces-

sary and irrelevant, knowing that she was saying silly things and not being able to stop, as if something had got loose in her mind. They did not take much notice of her, for chance made it a very close game and so Mrs. Caldecot had to watch them, the man handsome as ever, the girl newly radiant. It was then that Bob, who was short of darts, looked about the floor, and Mrs. Caldecot, at whose feet one had rolled after rebounding from the floor, bent down to pick it up; the novel, unregarded, slipped off her knees. As she handed the dart to Rodbourne, for a second their fingers touched. He smiled into her eyes with an air of good understanding, but he upset her, for he did not take the opportunity to press her fingers. He who had not kissed her, seen her, that day! Hating herself, Mrs. Caldecot realized that he could have done it, for Patricia was bending down, collecting darts for herself. It lasted only a second, but Rodbourne must have been vaguely conscious of disturbance, for now, as he played, he turned to Mrs. Caldecot and made comments on his play, while she listened in silence. She could not help feeling that Bob was trying to drag her into a relationship where she had no place. That was awful. Bob was trying to give her a show, but he couldn't do it. Then her pride revolted: let him do what he liked after all. And, anyhow, she couldn't bear it any more. So, in a voice made false by jauntiness, she said: "Well, I think I'll leave you children to your violent sports," and left the room.

The two went on for a little while. The hundred up was approaching its conclusion, for Rodbourne had scored eighty-two to Patricia's seventy-six. They stopped for a moment before the last round, and Bob, conscious of the disturbance he experienced through Mrs. Caldecot's retreat, found himself needing small talk:

"Now for the grand excitement, Miss Neale. You're twenty-four down, but you can do it if you get five flukes."

"You're a judge of flukes," replied Patricia, "judging from your practicing this in London."

Patricia had not thrown the dart, but stood looking at him seriously: "Oh, no, I'll be much too busy. It's not like being at home."

"Ah yes," said Rodbourne, feeling a little uneasy because he found pleasure in this idea, "you're going to be in town now. You didn't tell me where your mother had taken a house?"

"In Old Quebec Street. Such a dear little house, with a mews at the back. It will be like home hearing the horses kick."

He laughed: "But you're not coming to town to hear horses kick. You'll have a lovely time, won't you?"

"Rather. Mamma expects to be in town about eight months of the year. And, do you know, next week, I'm going to a first night."

"The first of your first nights," said Rodbourne with sham solemnity. "Isn't it dreadful to think

that you may come to look forward to the last of your last nights?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Rodbourne. You're much too clever. But I suppose I'll have to get used to that in London where everybody's so clever. You know," she hesitated, "I do feel rather shy about it. At home, well, I knew just what to say to the people who lived around about. . . ."

"Yes, I know. You talked to them about each other, to the vicar about the harvest festival or Christmas music, according to the season, to the gardener about bulbs or chrysanthemums, again according to the season."

"Exactly. And now I suppose I shall have to talk about the opera, and the latest microbe. Oh, I'm so frightened."

"Don't be," replied the man with affectionate indulgence. "We're only shop fronts with no stock behind. Do just as you do in Devonshire. Talk to the women about other women and talk to the men about themselves."

She did not reply for a moment. She had a frown between her childish brows, and Rodbourne felt immensely tender toward her, a little sorry, as if he could not bear that she should find even a trifling difficulty among her pleasures. While this mood was upon him, Patricia remarked: "Oh, well," and with languid hand, flung a dart nearly a yard wide from its object. With a little cry of petulance, she bent down, picked up a dart, and, as she stepped back,

put her foot upon another. The round object gave way on the polished floor; she exclaimed and fell back, instinctively Rodbourne's arm went out, caught her and drew her up. Then, as for the first time he felt her in his arms, warm, supple, and abandoned against him by the fact of her attitude, without intention, as if responding to some imperious intimate call, he flung about her the other arm and drew her all against him. Patricia so stood, embraced and bewildered, her arms hanging laxly, eyes closed and head thrown back, experiencing in a sort of terrified delight the brief harsh contact of the man who held her. She was conscious neither of withdrawal nor desire; in that moment she was caught up and mastered, less by assault than by self-surrender. Then the second in which so much emotion congregated was forgotten, for now as he held her to him, Rodbourne saw Patricia as he had never seen her before. The delicacy was still there. He could mark the veined eyelids, the unformed contour of the cheek, and, so close, the small parted mouth seemed redder, the inner flesh of the down-curling lower lip was so vivid as to transmute into animalism a feeling that had been compounded of æstheticism and romance. Without any hesitation, captured and all bonds forgotten, he bent down toward the beautiful lure of that submitted mouth.

Outside the door of the garden room, Mrs. Caldecot had hesitated for a moment. She didn't want to go back and disturb them at their game, their

game, not hers. But she had failed to find Mrs. Headcorn and in the drawing-room were no books except collected editions locked up in a cabinet. So she wanted the novel she had so carelessly been reading in the garden room. She remembered that it had fallen off her lap as she bent down to pick up a dart. She'd better fetch it. And when she hesitated she chid herself. After all, why shouldn't she go in. But her hesitation was still enough to cause her to turn so slowly the handle of the door that it made no sound.

Mrs. Caldecot stood for a moment in the doorway, confronted with those two. At last, and it seemed a long time, she realized purely in knowledge and not yet in pain that this thing which she had suspected before it came to be now indeed was, that the two had succumbed to the inevitable response of their youth, to the temptation of the future. She perceived this without putting it into words. It was to her something that had happened, that was happening. And she so stood, silent and unobserved, unable to move, to desire movement, compelled by extraordinary weakness to witness the sudden death of her happiness, the end of her security. It was then that Rodbourne purposefully bent down to touch Patricia's lips with his. The finality of this act unleashed in Mrs. Caldecot a sense of propriety. It was not so much that she could not bear to see this, as that she must not see it, that it was something no longer hers, upon which all that was

straight and proud forbade her to spy. So, quickly, as if she were fleeing, Mrs. Caldecot pulled the door to and, without shutting it quite, hurriedly went away.

It was a long time before Rodbourne raised his head from the lips where he drank an elixir the headiness of which intoxicated him, caused a whirl in his brain, made his temples beat. Patricia had not resisted him, nor responded, but still lay in his arms, abandoned and limp. And this enhanced his delight in her. He wanted her entirely, wanted more of her, all of her, to be familiar with that smooth skin, the curling rosy ears, the cleft chin, to slake his thirst of her, of all this freshness and this grace. So, more ardent now, less timid than at the first caress, he covered her cheeks, her neck with violent kisses, returning again and again to those mute, submissive lips, as if their contact inflamed rather than allayed his desire.

He let her go quite suddenly, not knowing why. Perhaps the silent cry from Mrs. Caldecot's tortured spirit, as she hurried away, had created some echo within him. In the midst of the joy which still about him hung its banners, he was conscious of immense awkwardness. He stood back, hands outspread, wanting to recapture Patricia into his clasp, and yet holding back. She stood before him now, her eyes open and in them a complex expression, fear, a bewildered delight, surprise at his onset, and surprise at finding herself released. She was

panting a little, and was so tossed by her emotions that she desired then only the comfort of his arms about her, not called by desire, but needing protection. Rodbourne, manlike, made an end of this tensity by seizing both her hands. They were very cold and lay in his, passive, as if already she said: "What is your will? What do you wish of me?" He did not know what to say; he wanted to find for her a way out of his immense confusion.

Hoarsely, he said: "You didn't mind? I couldn't help it. You're so lovely."

She did not reply; she showed no anger, but only still that surprise at being captured and released. The contact of his hands half-reassured her. She would have been content to stand so with him for a very long time. But the intimacy, which stilled the girl, fired the man. Now he had to play with those slender reddened fingers, to draw them apart and crush them close, to caress and to hurt them. The intimacy of the slight contact made him desire a more profound one. Again he took her into his arms to kiss her neck, her hair, forehead, eyes, to experience the indescribable delight of the contact of smooth, burning cheek. And once again he sought the lips that trembled and surrendered.

"I love you," he said. "I suppose I did the first time I met you at that show in London six months ago . . . but I didn't know how much." He stopped. He tried to find something else to say. Something tender and dominant, but the words

would not come. The repeated sensation had not been so violent as the first, and, in the temporary satiation of his senses, clarity overcame his brain. He let her go suddenly and stood back.

It was only then that Patricia spoke. She looked at him with frightened, adoring eyes. Why didn't he speak? What was the matter that he should stand like that? And stand apart? She felt so horribly lonely, for now she knew that this man had broken all the links which bound her to the rest of mankind by forging the link which now bound her to him. An expression came into his face which she recognized as worry, and, already maternal, unable to bear that something should trouble him, she threw aside her reserve, stepped toward him, and whispered, "What's the matter?"

He did not reply for a moment. Then at last: "I couldn't help it."

He looked so unhappy that Patricia forced herself to say, though she blushed and looked away, "I'm not angry."

He heard her in exquisite agony, and he had to collect all his energy to resist this adorable thing which offered itself. Disloyal! Damnation, let him be disloyal and have his minute. But he couldn't. He felt enmeshed and knew that he had cast another net across one in which he had struggled for eight years. So, almost roughly, he said: "I oughtn't to have done that. I'm sorry."

Patricia stared at him. This regret coming from

him after such caresses outraged her feminine pride. Sorry! How dare he! For Patricia in a few seconds had become a woman; at her lover's fire lit her own beacon. But her angry retort was stopped by the misery in his face. Rodbourne, harried by conflict, looked old, which to Patricia was terrible, and now became appealing. So, with trembling lips, she replied, "But why did you kiss me then?"

He did not reply. He could hear that trembling whisper, the protest of the woman who loves against an intellectual, a moral impulse which has nothing to do with love, which deflects foolish man and means nothing to loving woman. He knew that she loved him, and terror and delight fastened upon him. Still the girl watched him. She was past humiliation, did not care now, if only he loved her, if only he'd tell her so, if only he'd let her cast herself at his feet and kiss his hand. Oh, she knew it oughtn't to be like that, that he ought to be fervent, and exalted, as she was ready to be, but it didn't matter. She loved him too much, had unconsciously loved him too long to trouble with such trifles. So, without any pride, Patricia said, "Don't you care for me at all?"

With an exclamation, Rodbourne fixed his teeth into his under lip. His hand made a movement as if to seize her. Then, as if to protect himself against his own desire, he clasped his hands behind his back, and turned his head away, replying: "Oh, my God, Pat, I . . . Don't let me say it. I can't bear it. I mustn't."

"I don't understand," said Patricia.

He looked down to the floor, as he said in a dull, new voice that frightened her, "I can't explain." And he wandered away toward the mat into which, as if this relieved him, he savagely drove a loose dart. He could not bear to look round at the little, weary features which a moment before had glowed under his caresses.

After closing the door on the fulfillment of her fears, Mrs. Caldecot, unconscious of direction, had walked through the drawing-room, stopping only when she found herself facing the wall. Then, as if ill-aware of this obstacle, she went toward the right until she came to the door of the hall. She went right on to the front door, opening this, as if then all her energies were rallied to produce movement. She knew only one thing clearly—this, that she wanted to get away to any place, and there mixed with this a curious loneliness, she wanted May Headcorn badly, oh, not to tell her anything, for she hardly knew how she could tell it if she wanted to, but just to lay her head upon that big, kind breast. She would have gone out if, as she opened the door, the wind, which blew straight in, had not sprayed her face with a stinging shower. She drew back disgusted, for she hated the wet, hated to soil herself. It was characteristic of Mrs. Caldecot that as soon as she shut the door she instinctively turned to the hall mirror to readjust a strand of hair and delicately to touch with a handkerchief the wet drops

on her powdered cheeks. Then, as if her aimlessness had been given a direction, she went to the log fire which burned in the hall and sat down in an armchair, looking down upon the glossy heap that Chang and Suki, heads pillowed on flanks, made upon the rug.

Little by little a clearer consciousness came to her. So what she'd expected had happened. How quickly it had come! And yet she had seen it before it came, known it before they knew it themselves, known it, no doubt, because it was inevitable, because if not now, then later, Rodbourne would no longer be able to array their eight years of love, of common interest, of tender habit against the natural polygamy of man; against the attraction of bright eyes, new eyes. She was almost resigned. Years ago she had accepted a bill drawn by the future on the bank of her emotions, and she had always known that, though it might be renewed, ultimately it must be presented. "It had to be," she said, aloud. But, as she said this, as she confessed that it had to be, she reacted and told herself that it ought not to be. A deceptive hope even tried to suggest that perhaps this was not true, that she'd made a mistake. She remembered that a friend had once told her that on discovering her daughter in such an attitude, the girl excused herself by saying that the man was removing a speck of dust from her eye. Mrs. Caldecot had enough sense of humor to smile, enough vitality and skepticism. Her smile faded

as she realized what this meant. Oh, it wasn't that Bob loved her no more; the last years, even the last weeks had been no comedy; she knew him and he loved her, still loved her. But he was used to her; she was his happiness, not his romance. And anyhow, how much longer could she have held him? She, a still beautiful but aging woman? Mrs. Caldecot, as she realized this, as she had a hurried glimpse of the remainder of her life, growing in loneliness, felt an intolerable pang of self-pity. She wanted the reassurance of some human being, and was alone, would always be alone. Tears came into her eyes, slight tears, little more than a mist, and in this weakness she bent down to stroke the silky head of Suki. Suki raised her head, displeased at being disturbed, but Mrs. Caldecot needed her, and slid a hand between the warm, close-pressed bodies, and lifted her out, while Chang growled in his sleep, and Suki, disturbed, eyes astare, gave a little whine of irritation. For a moment Mrs. Caldecot held the little dog close, her lips pressed against the smooth hair that smelt clean and aromatic. Suki comforted her a little, so warm with sleep, round and languid. That mist of tears gained upon her eyelids. A single drop gathered upon the woman's eyelid and slowly rolled down upon the cool, shaggy ear. Held erect and uncomfortable, Suki wriggled, turned in Mrs. Caldecot's grasp, and licked her cheek.

She dropped the dog suddenly, forgetting it, facing only her misery. For some moments she was

conscious only of that immense wretchedness. Then she had a moment of revolt. With eyes now bright and gleaming, she told herself that she wouldn't be cast away like this, discarded when she had served her purpose as a tonic, a restorer. She wouldn't give in. She'd have it out. She'd confront him with all that he owed her, all that she'd given him. And more tenderly she thought, "I'll make him understand that this is only a passing fancy, that it's just a girl tempting him who can't give him what I can; I'll make him understand that he loves me, that he can't do without me." But again that other fear came to weaken her purpose: perhaps this time she couldn't break the slender link so swiftly formed, recapture him, enjoy him.... and then? If it weren't Patricia, wouldn't it be somebody else soon? Wouldn't youth still call to him? Wouldn't it call still louder as he grew older? She'd have to fight again and go through this again, and live in daily terror, expecting a new struggle and be beaten in the end. She could contest in love, in wit, in charm, but she must be beaten in age, by her age, and by his age as more and more he desired the thrilling neighborhood of youth. Aloud she said: "It's no good," and asked herself what she should do. Just say nothing and go away, leaving him free? Yes, she could do that, and things would take their course. But what would Bob think? what would he do? He wouldn't know that she had seen, and he wouldn't understand. She knew that

he was a man in honorable bondage, that he was hers because he was a straight man still more than because he was her lover. He would do nothing, say nothing, he would break the girl's heart if he needed to, and would remain hers in speech and deed if not in thought. For a moment Mrs. Caldecot asked herself: "Why not? Why smash such happiness as I can get out of him just for an idea? Perhaps I can still make him happy." Her pride revolted. No, not on those terms, not after what she had had. Loyalty after love. . . . fingerbowls after dinner. "There's only one thing to do," she thought, "give him up properly, straightly, quickly." She remembered an old gibe at the Whigs and bowlerized it: as with firm step she crossed the drawing-room, as she seized the handle of the door leading to that stage where she must play a necessary part, Mrs. Caldecot said, "I won him like a woman and I'll lose him like a lady."

She entered the garden room where Rodbourne, face to the target, was, for the tenth time perhaps, pulling out and digging in a dart, as if this mechanical exercise relieved him, or at least as if it served him as an excuse not to turn toward the girl, who with downcast eyes and clasped hands was confronting miserably something she could not understand. Mrs. Caldecot had not been afraid to find them in each other's arms. She had made enough noise with the door handle, but she was quite prepared, now armed with full courage, to face them

as she found them. Their attitude surprised her a little. She did not understand why nothing showed of their relationship, why they made no attempt to affect innocence. This made it more difficult for her to be as airy as she had intended. Her voice trembled a little as she said, "What! tired of the game already?"

She paused, and Rodbourne, without turning from the mat, said in a hoarse voice, "We've finished."

"Who won?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, cheerfully, turning to Patricia. The girl looked at her with frightened eyes, and Mrs. Caldecot, without trying to understand, determined only to make an end of this tensity, added: "You look very humble, Miss Neale. I'm afraid he beat you."

Then Rodbourne turned around, and Mrs. Caldecot was shocked by his drawn features. A stranger would not have noticed them, for emotion makes but slight marks on men of breed, but Mrs. Caldecot knew his face so well, every little curve and surface and various tint of it. He terrified her. How much he must love the girl to look like that! And yet, in a fairly even voice, he managed to say, "I was just going to give her her revenge."

They both looked toward Patricia; she stared at them in turn, as if a faint suspicion came to her that she stood alone, and that between these two was some sort of understanding in which she had no share. She could not have defined the feeling, but

it was that, and it translated itself in a desire to get away to a place where there were no stresses and no problems.

"Don't let me interrupt you," said Mrs. Caldecot. "I only came in to get that silly novel which I left here, while you indulged in manly sports. Where is it? Oh, yes, there on the floor. I let it slide. Go on with the game; I like watching."

Patricia did not reply to her, but said to Rodbourne: "I hope you don't mind, but I don't think I'll play any more. Not just now. I've got rather a headache. I think I'll go upstairs."

Some expression in Mrs. Caldecot's eyes must have told Rodbourne that she knew or guessed, and manlike, he tried to avoid a scene: "Oh, Miss Neale," he said. "I'm so sorry. Can't I get you a glass of water or something?" and tried to follow her.

But as Patricia passed out, and before Rodbourne reached the door, Mrs. Caldecot, in a quiet, even voice said: "Wait a minute, Bob. I want to talk to you about something."

CHAPTER V

ENDINGS

RODBOURNE turned suddenly as Mrs. Caldecot called him. She had spoken gently, yet there was in her voice a flick that was new to him. Something imperative. So, very slowly, he closed the door behind Patricia. He remained looking at Mrs. Caldecot, and holding the handle, as if he suggested by this attitude that he was indeed going but had stopped to reply to some trifling question about the car or the hour of lunch. She embarrassed him, for she had turned away. Still holding the novel in her hands, she was methodically pleating the fly-leaf into the shape of an accordion. Her silence, the automatism of her movement troubled him. Now that she must say something she found difficulty, and in this state of emotional disturbance he had to connect that significant air with the revolutionary stimuli of the morning. He could not think that she knew what was passing between Patricia and himself, for how could she know? But she might guess. He was uneasy as are all men before that reputedly uncanny intuition of women. He knew little enough about women to believe that they had

some special sense; he did not know that this alleged sense was merely accumulated observation of little facts, which men neglect. So he was afraid, and because he was afraid he had to speak: "Yes? What is it?" She did not reply, and her fingers went on with painful intentness, pleating the flyleaf into smaller and smaller folds. He could find in her features no elucidation. She seemed quite calm, eyelids downcast, no tremor in her mouth. But her immobility was oppressive, and Rodbourne already was on his defense. Feeling guilty, though not accused, he was trying to put on the armor of his masculine pride, to establish himself before his own conscience as the male enjoying his polygamous rights. He was prepared to deny if he could not extenuate, to bully if he could not seduce, and above all, to avoid a scene, to escape possible hysteria. If only somebody could have come in, or the telephone have rung. Then he would have gained time.

At last Mrs. Caldecot raised her eyes, and the expression he saw there disturbed him horribly. It was so gentle, so resigned, as if she stood at the grave of one beloved, whom she had not forgotten yet, but to the loss of whom she was now accustomed. It stirred him dreadfully. This handsome woman looked like a sick child, with its large eyes that do not understand what is the matter with it. He must have responded to her mood, for suddenly, as if forcing herself, she gave a poor little smile, only with the corners of her mouth, and

said: "Don't look so wretched, Bob. It had to come."

He started: "How do you mean, it had to come? What had to come? I don't know what you're talking about." His perplexity turned into irritation: "What's the matter, Claire? Are you going to make a scene? I shouldn't mind if I'd done anything. Now what is it? For heaven's sake, don't go on staring at me like that." He felt ashamed and came forward, hands outstretched: "Darling, what's the matter? Dearest! I couldn't come and see you this morning; there were servants all over the corridor, and when I put my head out at half-past eight. . . ."

"Don't, Bob," said Mrs. Caldecot, "please don't go on like that. You'll make me hysterical, and I want to avoid that. Please listen to me."

"Oh, what do you mean?" asked Rodbourne, wearily.

"You know what I mean. You know quite well. I'm not going for you. Why should I? Don't I know you. I know you're straight and that you're loyal to me. And I know you only want to be kind to me. My dear, I know all that. Aren't you the only man I ever loved? But it's no good, because, you see . . . I know."

"What do you mean?" asked Rodbourne, this time without truculence, and looking away.

"Oh," said Mrs. Caldecot, with a sigh, "don't evade me like that. You never have before. Be

straight with me as you always have been. Do you really think that I am such a weak, poor thing that I can't stand your telling me that you love Patricia?" She had brought out the last word with an effort, and was staring at the shamefaced figure as if even now she begged him to say it wasn't true. But after a pause she had to go on: "You see, you don't reply. Don't force me to say anything more."

The note of dismissal in her voice exasperated the man. He might drop women, but women must not drop him. Instinct compelled him to struggle for her, and so, following a masculine habit, he adopted the cool, even tone which in women arouses frenzy: "My dear Claire, what ever is all this nonsense? Won't you try to be sensible, just for a moment? Won't you try to be fair? You aren't being quite fair, you know. Suddenly, without any reason, you tell me that I'm in love with a girl, and that I don't care for you any more. I ask you: what have I done? What have I said? Have I been inattentive to you? Have I been hanging over the back of Miss Neale's chair? For heaven's sake, tell me what it is makes you think that I don't care for you any more."

Mrs. Caldecot looked at him tenderly. She was so sorry for him on his defense. So it was very softly she replied: "Oh, Bob, my dearest, why do you try to deceive yourself? Of course, you care for me, and you always will; you care for me when you think of our eight happy years, perhaps your

eight happiest years, just as they were mine. I've been everything to you, and your friend, and your companion too. Dear, of course you care for me, but not as you did. Tell me simply whether you really believe that you care for me as you did, when you can still feel upon your lips the kisses of that fresh young mouth?"

Then at last Rodbourne, startled, looked into her eyes: "Oh? But how did you . . .? You saw . . . that?"

"Yes. I came in a few moments ago to fetch this book, and . . . well, I went away."

He did not know why, but he felt extraordinarily ashamed. Not so much of what he had done; there was no crime in pressing caresses upon a woman who pleased him; there was not even exactly harm in superficial infidelity, but to be seen, to be caught. Like a butcher's boy in an area. To think that this woman, who mattered so much to him, should have witnessed the first caress he had given another woman who also mattered much to him . . . it was soiling and beastly. It made them both undignified. But, because he felt guilty in spite of his masculine self-justification, he wanted to abase himself: "I'm sorry, Claire, only let me explain. It wasn't what you think. Oh, I know you think I'm in love with her and want to marry her and all that, but it isn't true. You see, it was an accident. She slipped on a dart and I caught her as she fell, and there she was, so close that I did it . . . well, just like that,

as one does at a dance, in a car, without thinking of it. Without it mattering. It was just a moment of madness, an accident. There, don't look at me like that; don't you believe it was only an accident?"

"Yes, I do believe you, but you can't escape the consequences."

"Don't talk such nonsense. If a man were to marry all the women he kisses. . . ."

"I don't mean that," said Mrs. Caldecot. "I'm not the sort of woman who'd make a silly fuss over a flirtation. I've got something of you that a hundred dancing girls couldn't take from me, if you set them all up separately in their own flats. It isn't that. If you'd merely been unfaithful to me, it wouldn't have caused me a moment's worry. But you haven't been unfaithful to me with Patricia: you only love her."

"I don't," he cried, a little shrilly, as if trying to convince himself. "I don't care if I never see her again. It's you Claire, only you, and you know it."

Mrs. Caldecot did not at once reply. It was so good to hear him say that. For a moment she was weak and told herself: "Perhaps he's speaking the truth after all. It's natural enough. If a young and pretty girl falls into the arms of a man, and if they've been familiar, and ragging together, as they do nowadays, well of course they kiss; it's part of the rag. Why shouldn't they, bless 'em? Why should I be such a fool as to smash up my own happiness when I'm not sure? Would he pro-

test so much unless he cared for me?" Mrs. Caldecot's destiny might have been changed if Rodbourne had not perceived his slight advantage and tried to press it. "I love you," he said. "You're the only woman in the world for me, forever."

His protest broke the little thread that was spinning between them to bind them once more. Forever? How could she bind him forever? She still had some youth and much beauty, but was she holding him? How would she hold him when those things were gone? In a sort of despair she decided to test him: "Bob, if I said to you now: 'we love each other; we know each other very well; we know just what we can give each other; we've been very much to each other and we still are; we know that we can together pass the rest of our lives. Well, let's drop this secrecy. Let's have done with all this hiding. Let's go abroad, you and I, and live together happily the rest of our days.'"

For a moment Rodbourne did not reply. Then: "Well . . . all right. If you'd like to. I'd love to, you know that. Only it's so difficult just now. We've got to remember that I'm in Parliament and that I'm committed to. . . ."

For the first time Mrs. Caldecot laughed. He loved her laugh, that was high and clear, but to-day a note of agony ran through it and hurt him. She must have felt that, for she stopped: "Don't be angry at my laughing. Oh, my dear, my dear, I know all about that; I know I'd make you happy in

a way, and you know it too. And still, you haven't said 'yes.' While eight years ago, don't you remember that for three months, every day, I had to fight you to prevent you resigning your seat? To prevent you from packing me up in a crate, as you used to say, and shipping me to Italy. Don't you remember that you didn't get me until you promised that you wouldn't smash everything up?"

"I don't see what that's got to do . . ."

"Oh, yes, you do. It was I who kept you in Parliament; it was I who compelled you to keep things quiet, and you were kicking and chafing against it. In those days, my dearest, you wanted only me. You didn't want fame or a career or anything. You were mad. You wanted only me."

Rodbourne did not reply at once. His eyes were tender as he remembered those days of mad music and strong wine. It seemed so long ago, and he felt small before this lovely, beloved woman, by circumstance transformed into his accuser. "You make me ashamed," he said.

"Don't say that, my dearest, I can't bear it. After all, what is it that I've always wanted for you? That you should be free and proud and strong. Oh, I'm not lecturing you, but you know I don't want those silly little things that people call proper pride and decency to come between us, and that sort of nonsense."

"Oh, well, I suppose I've done wrong," he replied, in a tired voice.

"You haven't. Of course, you've done nothing wrong. You haven't betrayed me, or lied to me more than any man has to lie to any woman. It wasn't your fault. The trap was set before you went into it because you had to have what the trap offered. It's not your fault that you're young and strong, that you want to live, and that women love you. No wonder women love you. I often wonder how you stuck to me so long."

"Let that alone."

"All right, Bob. All I want to say is this: there's no harm in your being in love with Patricia. She's young, pretty; she's very sweet-tempered; and she's a proud, fine girl who'll make you happy. I . . . I like her. I like her very much. Oh, don't protest. I want you to be happy; you know that quite well. And there's nobody who'll do as much for you as Patricia will. She'll believe in you and help you and work for you in the way that women should work, keep your house, be a pretty hostess, make useful friends."

"Damnation!" exploded Rodbourne, "you talk as if I was getting a housekeeper."

"So you are. You'll get a housekeeper, a home-keeper, and a heart-keeper. Men make and women keep; it's no use kicking against it. So don't be absurd, and don't treat me like a mean, jealous woman, whom you half suspect has been spying on you, and had tried to hold on to you whether you like it or not. And has struggled to use your sense

of honor against your wish to be free. Don't treat me like that, as you never did before. Do understand that the only thing I want is your happiness, at any cost." She held out her hand. "Now, Bob, that's enough. Remember me kindly whenever you think of me, and I know that'll be often. Say goodbye to me nicely and marry her."

Rodbourne did not take her hand. He felt horribly unhappy while Mrs. Caldecot persisted in tearing up their relationship, tearing at it relentlessly, exposing its roots, and one by one breaking them away from the soil where so long they had flourished. Also, through his misery, ran a thin vein of offense, so his voice was cold: "I say, Claire, it's very nice of you to—how shall I put it?—hand me over, nicely labeled 'To Patricia, a present from Claire Caldecot.' "

"Don't, Bob. Don't talk like that; you hurt me. And I've done nothing to make you want to hurt me." Her voice rose in anger: "Don't speak like that to me just because I'm trying to give you your happiness, to give you your freedom. Don't turn on me in that awful, cold way. You look at me as if you hated me, just because I want you to marry the girl you want to marry."

"Oh, don't talk about it as if it was all settled, as if I'd gone behind your back and proposed to the girl. I've not said a word about it. I haven't asked her to marry me. How do you know she would if I were to? I've no patience with you sometimes.

What's the good of this scene? If I'd asked her to marry me and she'd said 'yes,' it would have been time enough. Whereas now, if I do as you . . . seem to want me to . . ."

"Oh, don't be brutal."

"Well, you do seem to want me to," replied the man, exasperated. "And if I do it to please you and she refuses me, what state shall we find ourselves in? Yes, if she refuses me. You hadn't thought of that, had you?"

She thought him silly, but she loved him, more than ever before, as she said, "Bob, come here." He drew a little closer: "Look me in the eyes and remember everything you can about Pat. The way she's looked at you, spoken to you, her color when you've said something: remember her as she was in your arms a few moments ago, and remember if she struggled and if she refused you the kiss you wanted. Remember all that, and then answer me truthfully: If you went to her now, this moment, and asked her to marry you, do you honestly believe she would say 'no'?" Mrs. Caldecot waited for a reply which she knew could be given only in the shape of silence. Then she went on: "You see, Bob, you can't answer me. You can't because you don't want to hurt me. Don't be afraid; hurt me all you need; you can't help it. You know quite well she loves you, so don't struggle and evade me any more. I'm your best friend and your dearest memory. Shake hands, and you're free."

At this suggestion of freedom, which excluded him from a relationship which had been exquisite, an immense desolation fell on Rodbourne. Seizing both her hands, he said in a low intense voice: "But I don't want to marry her. I don't want my freedom. I love you, only you. Good heavens! Do you think that any other woman could mean to me what you do? Don't you know that year after year I've only learned to love you more, to know you more? When I've got you in my arms, with yours about my neck, when I bury my lips in your hair, and close my eyes, to feel you and to breathe you, all your sweetness and your perfume, who do you think counts except you, just you?"

"Is it true?" whispered Mrs. Caldecot, her eyes closed.

"Of course, it's true." In that moment Rodbourne was sincere. Holding Claire Caldecot thus, his hands clasped in her broad white forearm, seeing her so close, feeling the passionate breath of her nostrils and of her parted red lips, he was almost hiding the little white phantom in his brain. For a second he thought that the phantom was gone. It was true. Yes, it was true. Only this dear woman in his arms mattered. But all the same the phantom would not quite vanish. As he drew Mrs. Caldecot close into his arms, the image of Patricia, so slight, so pale when her childish blue eyes implored him, became now more evident, holding out little pitiful hands, begging him not to forget her.

And he fought against her. As if to convince himself that indeed he was victorious, that willingly he could enslave himself again, he bent down and kissed Mrs. Caldecot on the cheek. For a moment she submitted. Eyes closed, she even pressed her cheek against his lips, so that her forehead rested against his. But almost at once a revulsion overcame her. The thrill of his contact ceased to affect her. It was not enough. In sudden despair, which took the form of revolt, she pushed him away and released herself.

"Let me go, Bob. It's no good. That's not how you used to kiss me. It's as if you didn't want to. No, I beg your pardon, I know that's not true; it's as if you wanted to want to, my dear, and you can't. It's not your fault."

"Look here," he said, roughly.

"Don't please. I haven't much strength left. Don't struggle with me. Oh, I know, if you like, you're stronger than me; there's nothing to prevent you forcing me to submit. I suppose you can even manage to make me enjoy caresses I'm no longer entitled to because there's somebody you love better than you love me. Please. Please, Bob, let me go. Let me keep my self-respect." Her voice was altered by tears: "Don't struggle with me. Let me remain a decent woman. Oh, you don't understand." She pushed him away. "No, Bob, please. Men don't understand. If I let you kiss me now, and if I let myself enjoy it, I'll feel beastly. Oh, don't make

me take pleasure in your caresses; it would be as if they pleased me because they came from a man, instead of from love, only love." Her knees bent under her, for she was worn to weakness by emotion. "Let me go." Half-frightened, Rodbourne released her, and she sat down on the sofa, breathing fast. Then, rather faintly: "Don't touch me now and don't say anything more. It's been lovely for eight years, oh, always, always. You've given me all the happiness a man can give a woman, all the happiness I've ever known, and I . . . well, I tried to help you a little. I did try, Bob, and I think I did."

"Claire!" he cried, in a strange, hoarse voice, for now he realized that this was true, that the final parting had come, and he felt lonely.

"Good-bye, Bob. Don't think about me any more now. Think of me later. Now it's Patricia who counts. She can give you what you need, everything you need, my dear. What can I give you now after all, except love?"

"That's all I want," he replied, rather weakly, realizing his defeat.

"Well, so can she. She can give you love, oh, not in the same way as I can, but she can give you all the love you need to bear you company in the coming years. And she'll bear you better company than I can, in secrecy. She can give you love, companionship, the social life which you like, and which you've got to have if you're to make your way. She can give you that, while I can only com-

promise you, and perhaps injure you by and by. She can give you children, which you know you want. And nearly twenty years hence she'll be giving you youth and grace, while I'll be gray. It can't be helped. One's got to get gray, and it's not your fault. Leave me, and ask her to marry you; it's the right thing for you to do, for both of you; it's the right thing for me to bear. Don't protest; don't struggle any more. It's been so fine all these years, so don't spoil it now. Let our last memory be as beautiful as the first. We've taken all we can from life, and if we can't take any more, that's just life, and it's not your fault or mine. So remember I'm your friend and say good-bye."

After a long pause Rodbourne replied: "I suppose you're right. I wish it hadn't happened. Good-bye. But, Claire . . . for the last time."

She put out an arm; "No, don't kiss me. Better not. I'd rather remember the kiss of the lover than the kiss of parting." She smiled: "Don't you remember, you always scoffed at the hurried pecks on railway station platforms."

"Don't," snarled the man.

"Why not? Let me keep my sense of humor. I need it. Go away, Bob. I'd rather you did. I want to be alone a little while."

After a second's hesitation, Rodbourne turned and went to the door. As he reached it, as he touched the handle, as she realized that all this was true, that this was the end, that when the door closed

behind him it would establish no frail barrier, but an obstacle that courage, time, patience, even love could never overcome, a frightful sense of desolation overwhelmed the woman. She was left and cast away. She felt impossibly alone in a world impossibly vast, a woman discarded by time and circumstance. She jumped to her feet, holding out her arms, trying to cry out his name, to call him back, to hold on to what she could, even if it were only shadow. But though she struggled to, the intensity of her emotion paralyzed her throat. No sound came from her. She was distraught, and even when the door closed behind him she did not quite realize that he had gone; still she so stood, eyes staring, mouth open, her brain filled with an unuttered cry for him. Striving to vanquish her paralysis, filling her own spirit with a shriek, nothing now but a screaming silence.

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CHAPTER VI

A VERY GALLANT LADY

188 Seville St.
Knightsbridge, S. W.
Tuesday

My Dear May,

I feel awfully ashamed of myself for not having answered your two letters, but I've had such an awful lot to do. I don't know how it is, but at this time of the year, what with spring cleaning and having to get some new frocks, and Maud all the time threatening to give notice until I nearly dismiss her myself, I really don't know which way to turn. The weather's been dreadful, too. Half the time one can't get a taxi, and I come home every day understanding what a poodle feels like on a wet afternoon. I'm so sorry about the bulbs, but it really was your fault. I did my best, but the agent is a Dutchman, and what with his not knowing much English, and I knowing no Dutch, it's no wonder that I got the wrong ones. You ought to think yourself lucky I didn't send you onions. It's always the same thing, and don't say I'm being nasty about it, but the last time I bought a hat for Hettie, it was, as I said, the same thing. She said she didn't dare wear it, and you'll say I ought to have known what Derby was like, and I did. I went to Clapham to buy her a hat. I'll never buy anything for anybody again.

I'm sorry to be so captious, but you know life is always irritating; it's all very well for you who live in the country. You don't go anywhere; you never have to, and all the servants love you. Everybody does love you, my dear May, especially I. Oh, I do miss you, you know; you're so comfortable. (I'm not being rude, I don't mean it in that way, and I'm frightfully excited to hear you've lost four pounds' weight. By the way, I've lost a couple of pounds; my giddy life, I suppose.)

I'm really frightfully worried, for I'm beginning to think that it's serious about Maud. I told you that she has a young man, a butcher near here. If he were only smart and handsome I shouldn't bother so much, but he's one of those dreadful, sober, respectable widowers of forty and he wants to settle down. He's been telling Maud that for four or five years. Of course, it's been very nice, for we got cutlets out of him during the war; I need add nothing to this. But the war's over and the butcher's thinking of the reconstruction, and he seems absolutely determined to make Maud the keystone of his new edifice. I don't know what I shall do without her. She has a way of threading ribbon in my undies that's absolutely a work of art. I hate threading ribbons. I'm thinking of taking to calico and being done with it.

I'm awfully excited about Dickey Altrincham. I never thought they'd do it, and why he wants to run away with Mrs. St. Lawrence now I can't understand. Of course, I never liked the woman, but I've no grudge against poor Dickey. Well, people will do these things. And do you know that they're again trying to bring in something like the hobble; they all say that's because cloth is so dear, but as they charge more than ever they did before I don't see where that comes in.

I look a perfect fright in anything that tapers downwards. I nearly cried yesterday when my new skirt came back. My dear, I looked like one of those spinning tops that small boys cast at your feet when you aren't expecting it. It's too bad, because Redphreys had made me a sweet little coat, nigger brown, with dead-gold silk lapels. You can see the pattern from the bits I send you. I'm afraid the carmine would be a bit on the red side for you, but the blue and silver would be absolutely the thing for you, if you had a silver gray, or better still a steel-gray cloth. And black enamel buttons with silver edges and centers. You could show a strip of the lining along the cuffs. I'm having extra thick cuffs; it sounds heavy, but it makes one such a slim wrist.

I can't come down just yet, but I hope to at the end of next month. I met Violet Chester the other day in Bond Street; she had her little husband with her, and they were looking into a jeweler's shop with an air that said he was going to buy it for her. They told me Mona's going to get married, but then they're always saying that.

You must come and stay with me soon; London's lovely in April; there are a whole lot of new plays coming on, and you'd better come quick because they never stay on for long. I've been to a wonderful show of landscapes by an armless man who paints with his feet. Anybody can see he does.

With much love,

Yours affectionately,

CLAIRE

P. S. You said nothing about Booker. I conclude that she continues to reign undisturbed.

Mrs. Caldecot smiled to herself a little bitterly

as she closed the envelope. Then she accepted a couple of invitations, paid some bills, put through a telephone call. She examined her check book and thoughtfully compared the items with those in her pass book. The result was enough to annoy without disturbing her. Everything seemed very expensive, and she couldn't make out what became of the money represented by the checks marked "self." She reflected that it was funny, but it was a problem which had pursued her all her life. One went on drawing checks to self, and then when one tried to find out what one got for them, one found that one had drawn other checks for house, food, clothes, service, for everything. One drew checks for self and one got nothing. Just like life. This rather feeble simile she used as a warning to herself. She wasn't going to think about that sort of thing. She was so determined not to think of it that she forced herself once more to the telephone to ask the bootmaker whether her appointment was for three-thirty, though she knew quite well that it was for three.

She was perfectly quiet, perfectly collected; she was determined to run her household and all her affairs with a sort of calm efficiency. Getting up at the usual time, making a good breakfast whether she wanted it or not, and seeing to things properly. And not shutting herself up, or any nonsense like that, but going out and meeting her friends as usual. She'd been going a good deal to the theater lately,

and on the whole she was having a fine time. She wasn't going to do anything which could suggest that she was unhappy, or that anything unusual had happened. She wasn't going to seem defiant, or pretend to be more cheerful than she felt, but she was determined that nothing in her manner should betray change. She suffered, granted, but that was her business. She needed no sympathy, did not seek to relieve herself by confidences. She was living an ordinary life as she had lived it before; it did no good to go round talking to people about one's misfortunes; one only bored them, or made oneself ridiculous; one lost one's sense of dignity, which in such a situation was the only comfort one could expect.

That at least was Mrs. Caldecot's point of view most of the day. She had managed to secure enough futile occupations to fill up the waking hours. As she was popular, and as London was waking to the spring, she went out almost every night, or gave her usual little parties. These latter produced, however, certain difficulties. She had always been careful, and Rodbourne had not in those eight years become an immutable figure in her entertainments. She would have wanted him to be such, and he had often quarreled with her because she excluded him. But Mrs. Caldecot had made her rules. From the point of view of his political career, of a social position that would stand a fair amount but not too much, it would never have done for Bob always to

be hanging about the house. He did not come to see her more than once, or at the most twice a week . . . but he was either coming, or would come next day, or had just been. He had sat on that arm-chair, forgotten a newspaper cutting on the mantel-piece. Mrs. Caldecot thought herself absurd as, some evenings, she looked with content into the ash tray where lay the stump of his cigar. Well, that was over. No more would the familiar ghost tread his customary walk. That was over. He wouldn't come here again. Or if he came after he'd married Patricia, she'd have to pretend that her wound was healed, knowing that it was only covered over. She supposed he'd come. It couldn't be helped, society being what it was, for to quarrel would have been to confess something that Patricia must never know. He was gone; say no more about it, think no more about it, feel no more.

That was all over, it was all very well, but it couldn't be done so easily. If Mrs. Caldecot had had a large house and a husband, several noisy children, various servants, some barking dogs, it would have been easier. There wouldn't have been room for the ghost to walk. Things went pretty well until after dinner, if she happened to be at home alone; if she went out things were all right until about midnight, when the taxi driver pulled up his flag and drove off. After she closed the door on the silent hall, Mrs. Caldecot always tried to be airy with herself. She looked upon the table to

see if the late post had brought any letters. Oh, she didn't expect any letters from him, for she had forbidden those, but there might be something else, something interesting. The daily romance of the post might bring her . . . she didn't know what. So she went upstairs, tearing open the envelopes, and perhaps humming a tune. Perhaps she even went into the drawing-room where some lemon squash was left for her in case she came in thirsty. She nearly always drank the lemon squash; that was something to do. She tried to go to bed as soon as she could, but she never could go quite quickly enough. The house was silent; the servants slept; on the ground floor, first floor, second floor there was nothing except herself and all these memories. It was no use running away. There was his arm-chair, the broad arm where she so often had sat, looking over his shoulder while he read her extracts from the report of a Royal Commission. She closed her eyes, telling herself that she must not raise the image, but she closed them all the same to raise it better, to catch once more the patch of light thrown from the central bulb upon his left temple, the well-tended brown hands holding the bluebook, the little gleaming hairs upon their backs. She could hear so well the steady, low voice as he read. He read atrociously, like most people who speak fluently, stumbling and missing commas, and starting sentences over again in the middle; she liked that imperfection: it helped him to be perfect.

Again she told herself, "I mustn't," and still went on indulging in vice. What else could she do? Everything was alive with him, the window with the warped sash with which he struggled to look out and see if the night was fine, whether he should ring for a taxi; the mantelpiece upon which unrebuked he had made marks by knocking out his pipe; the blotter, on the one sheet of which a few words in his writing were preserved. It was his room, the place where he had stood among her friends, cheerful and popular, where women had made up to him, while from time to time he threw her a glance of complicity to tell her that it was all right, that she had her share in the joke. This happened nearly every time, though she struggled against it, and by degrees was managing to expel the most material evidences of him. She had burned that sheet of blotting paper, sent back the book he was reading. She had done what she could, but in a way she suffered more in the places less definitely associated with him, the stairs, her bedroom, other rooms that had no personality. It was so silent in this house; her feet made no sound upon the stairs; her bedroom was so large. She felt so fearfully alone. Of course, she had been alone for thirteen years, so it wasn't quite that, but when she had Bob it was as if a kindly wraith went with her. She was not alone then, but only waiting. Now there was nothing to wait for; to-morrow would be as to-day; she would go on among those many empty rooms and

seek sounds for company. And there would be nothing. It made her a little frightened. She didn't know why but it was—how could she put it?—as if in any room except the one in which she found herself something lay dead, inoffensive but so still, something that lay white and could not rise again. Sometimes the day dream grew literal. She made a picture of Bob lying under a white sheet, his fair hair in order, his eyes closed, his body defined by the little hills under the sheet made by his feet and his breast. The candle by his side cast upon his pale cheek the shadow of his gleaming eyelashes. Once she went downstairs to see if it were true, and though, of course, there was nothing there, she was frightened: it was as if something had been there and had been taken away. It was unendurable, the silence, the vast space, the sense of depending only upon herself, holding all this up without human contact or relationship. It was glacial. She tried to do things. She smoked. She read. She rattled ornaments to make sound, she noted decays in carpets and boards to be put right, but it didn't seem to mean anything, all that. It was worse than being haunted by a ghost. She was haunted by an emptiness.

Among the definite anguishes that Mrs. Caldecot experienced was her loss of communication with the world of ideas. It was not that she missed the letters which she had forbidden. Those had never been very many, for they met one way or another

almost every day, and he had written only to make appointments, and occasionally, as he put it, sent her a love letter to keep her in a good temper. What she missed was the constant talk about the events of the day, the political movements which she knew so intimately, the secret intentions of this group, or the gossip about that minister. Mrs. Caldecot knew the details of a good many bills before they were drafted, and so she read her daily paper, not like the ordinary reader, but criticized it through private knowledge, smiling at its errors and amusedly guessing exactly what this piece of news would cost the Cabinet. She had lived in the middle of political drama, and as it had been a daily excitement, she did not know how to do without it. She had been apart from Rodbourne less than two months, so she could still draw on accumulated knowledge; she still guessed things from the news, but lately she had been puzzled. Things were printed which she did not understand so clearly, or which surprised her. She did not at once realize what that meant, and it came to her only by degrees that day by day she was receding from the center of political ideas. That didn't matter, she told herself; she'd never cared very much except for Bob, but it reminded her every day in the most material, cold way that this defined her severance. She had gone out of his life; thus came the evidence of parting. When she first realized this, it hurt so much that she decided to read the newspapers no more.

But she couldn't help it; eight years of habit were too strong, and, after missing two days, once again she began to follow while trying to draw away; she even criticized to herself a speech of Rodbourne's after hiding the paper away and telling herself she wouldn't read it. She gave way at last, for she wanted to keep that much, to hold on to a distant interest if she could no longer give personal service.

She had, too, to find other things. She wanted a substitute for her old preoccupations. It was that, no doubt, led her for the first time in her life to interest herself in the spring cleaning. She always disliked it. She had a catlike objection to the disturbance of the affair, but this time she found an obscure anodyne in directing those detestable operations, in wandering, dusty and untidy, about furniture stacked in the middle of the rooms, in tripping over carpets waiting on the stairs to go to the shampooer. The noise of the unleashed domestics, who were enjoying the opportunity of dropping and banging without limit, the abominable dinners of cold beef, tinned soup, and cheese, all this artificial activity delighted her, because it forced upon her preoccupations. She realized it when once she told herself: "When a woman's got no one to love, she's got to have business. When she has got somebody she doesn't need it."

One result of the spring cleaning was the destruction of the drawing-room carpet, upon which the window cleaner emptied a pailful of some acid of

his own, that was very effective on glass, but had on carpets unfortunate results. This led Mrs. Caldecot to go out and look for a new carpet, and to wander happily among furniture shops, where in the end she became intoxicated with a flaming Axminister, striped yellow and black. She was in a great hurry to get it home; she loved it so much. When it arrived, she discovered with a shock that in buying the attractive thing she had forgotten that the room it was to lie in had been decorated to suit the former carpet, which was cerise. The walls were green, the moldings gilt; in the panels were set little frescoes after Boucher and Watteau. The result was absurd: it was the Russian Ballet at the court of Louis XV. So there rose up in Mrs. Caldecot's mind the wild and enduring passion which secretly devours all women: to redecorate. She had a splendid month. She encountered all the delicious difficulties of the occupation; she ordered Georgian red from a decorator who, like most of his kind, could picture only one kind of red—namely, Victorian dining-room red. When reproached, he was exasperated into pillar-box red. It took ten days to persuade him into the tempered terra cotta of the period. Mrs. Caldecot had the egg-and-tongue moldings broken down and replaced by flat cornices. She painted her ceiling a pale yellow, which the decorator thought rather immoral. And in a splendid fit of energy she had the whole contents of the drawing-room taken away and replaced in the

Moscow-Babylonian style: all the furniture was painted, some the color of egg, some purple touched with gold. The mantelpiece was japanned black, and its decoration of fruit picked out in Bakst colors. When she could think of nothing else to do, she bought a cushion of a color she hadn't seen before. But this amusement could not last long. She was happy while it lasted, but when the drawing-room was done, and when she was tempted to go on and redecorate the whole house, she realized that this too would have its end: at once her passion subsided. She didn't want things that had an end. She hadn't lived like that. She could not do with finite occupations, she who had lived on instalments of eternity. She began to feel very idle, and it was that caused her to entertain and be entertained, while in the first fortnight of her separation she had decided to see nobody. She then wanted to cherish her grief, to crawl away like an animal preparing to die. In such alterations of feeling her misery expressed itself. She wanted to be alone, unquestioned and unobserved; she wanted to live a giddy, whirling life; she wanted the calm affection of May Headcorn; she couldn't bear to go near her and talk about it. She was in chaos.

About two weeks after her return from Cantrel Court, Mrs. Caldecot received from Stephen Britford an invitation to dine. This was not exactly unusual, as she had known Britford for twenty years, but somehow, of late years, she had seen less

of her old friend. She met him occasionally, two or three times a year. He dined at Seville Street and seemed to get on very well with Rodbourne. Still, he always made her a little awkward. In her present mood she refused, but stayed for some time fingering the letter. After all? Why not? She was very fond of Stephen, and he . . . well, she knew he was in love with her. Always had been. Poor old Stephen! He had been so frightfully, so wearisomely faithful to her. So faithful, so untouched by gossip that it had become dull. He proposed to her when she was twenty, and she refused him, not only because she didn't love him, but somehow because she didn't feel he loved her. Stephen was so cold, so precise. Clever, yes, sometimes entertaining, quite distinguished, a K. C. very early. Everything except the gleam that some other men had, that even Geoffrey, the vile, the worthless Geoffrey had. She sighed; Geoffrey had carried her off; she didn't know what she was doing. Yet she didn't despise herself, for she knew that in those days few women could have resisted Geoffrey Caldecot. He did everything in such a lovely masculine way: he drank, not in a disgusting way, but as she expected they did under Charles II; when he gambled and came to his last throw, he always emptied his pockets and staked everything he had, taxi fare and coppers, everything; when he favored a woman he kissed her with a debonair laugh, as she expected Prince Hal did, bending down from his horse, and

chucking a village maiden under the chin. Of course, Britford hadn't a chance against him. But he accepted her decision, remained her friend, went on seeing her. Toward the end, when all London knew how Geoffrey treated her, Britford quietly repeated that he loved her and asked her to go away with him. But he did it so simply. He was offering her something terrific, his whole career. But he didn't make anything of that. He behaved as if he were making her a deed of gift of his future. She couldn't do it. Like him as she did, respect him as she must, he didn't move her. Nor did he move her during the five years of her loneliness after Geoffrey deserted her. He was always there, sedulous, attentive. Once or twice she felt that there was some fire behind those monkish gray eyes, but he wouldn't let it out; it smoldered and glowed perhaps, but there was no spark. So still he remained her friend, still her friend when he realized that Rodbourne had succeeded where he had failed. And now again. Oh, he was no Major Dobbin; there was in his pursuit something relentless and cold. It was as if he took his case from the King's Bench to the Court of Appeal, from the Court of Appeal to the Lords. And she knew that if he were beaten in the Lords he'd rig up yet another case on a different basis. Well, it was flattering in a way, as are many irritating affairs. No, she really couldn't be bothered. So, as she went out, she wrote another letter, accepting.

At dinner Britford behaved exactly as usual. He had not changed much in twenty years. That was the terrible part of it. He had always been slight, formal, elegant, with quietly hard gray eyes under a good, high brow; perhaps the flesh was a little tighter drawn on the bones, but the hair was only spattered with gray. Like his pursuit, Britford endured forever. He gave her a very good dinner, as he always did. His car was found easily because it stood at the right place. They went to the theater, and there were no mechanical difficulties at all. Britford was not one of the men who must wave at the program girl. And he behaved perfectly. She felt that he knew all about Rodbourne, probably that he knew everything that happened in her house, and that he had added the new facts to her file. But he said nothing about it; he talked agreeably as usual about the things of the day; he gave her some details of only one case that he was concerned with, which happened to be a rather spicy divorce. She knew that he had probably selected that case in the morning, knowing it would interest her. She could hear him asking his clerk to remind him of the cases that were coming on so that he might pick the one ideally suited, just as he might select the right brand of Sauterne. Heavens! what a bill he must have against her! She was rather frightened of him as they drove back, for this was obviously the moment when he would begin his fourth series of tactical advances. Instead of this he con-

gratulated her on her frock, discussed it with good taste and let her go. She was not exactly disappointed, but surprised. Hitherto, Britford had never played her: perhaps he didn't care for her any more. This kept her awake a little while. She did not want the burden of Britford's affection, but, abandoned as she was, in a way for the second time, she terribly wanted the reassurance that alone men could give her. She didn't want to realize that perhaps even now age and old habit were insuring her against approach.

She was very miserable for the next few days. If even Britford didn't care for her any more, perhaps nobody would, for in him it was almost a custom to make love to her. Oh, she didn't want him to, she didn't want anybody to, but she still wanted them to want to. She'd been admired and loved for twenty years. She couldn't imagine the next twenty without something like that. What else was she good for? Being a pure woman she was a little ashamed of herself. She had never deliberately tried to attract a man; she had been impeccably faithful to the two she had known; she had yielded to Rodbourne because she needed him only as much as he needed her; some might have called her immoral, but she had the soul of a young lady. Only she was also human and vain.

So she was very glad when after those two days Stephen rang up and asked her to lunch. They went to a private room at a famous restaurant.

This did not frighten her, for they had often done it before, Stephen being one of those men who like to be very well served by a special attendant, and he had never profited by the situation to the extent of the slightest familiarity. Ten years before, she had told herself that she could trust Stephen, told herself so with a little resentment. So they had a very good lunch, and Mrs. Caldecot felt so unhappy that perhaps she took a little too much to drink. Stephen was in a cheerful mood, and she wanted to respond to it; it was that caused her to add Benedictine with the coffee. Generally, she avoided liqueurs, and this small dose had some effect. After a moment she saw Britford a little mistily. He was quite normal, was chatting simply about a play he had wanted her to see; he was not real to her, and talked of things that had happened long ago, somewhere else. Suddenly he said:

"Well, that was nice stuff, wasn't it? This is the first time I've seen you drink it, Claire." She smiled stupidly, and he went on: "Upon my word, Claire, I believe you're tight. Oh, do be tight; won't you get up and try a skirt dance?"

Mrs. Caldecot rose to her feet. After all, why not? Why not be giddy and gay? But almost at once the sense of forlornness returned to her. She made a picture of herself skirt-dancing, like an old print of the 'eighties, faded and dusty, touched with blue mold at the edges. So suddenly her loose-lipped smile vanished; falling upon the chair she

buried her face in her hands and burst into horrible, shaking sobs. For a moment Britford stared at her. He had not expected this, and it embarrassed him. He had brought her to the restaurant with intentions. He loved her as he always did, and would get her when he could, he . . .

Then he had to get up and go to her, for this was frightful.

"Don't," he said, timidly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Mrs. Caldecot did not look up. If one hand had not been pressing against her mouth she would have filled the room with screams. She was crying in a way that Britford did not understand, in a horrible, animal way, shaking violently as she wept, and not trying to talk, but expressing herself in horrible moans, broken by gasps for breath.

"My God!" said Stephen, "don't do that, Claire." Seizing her by the shoulders, he took her into his arms. She did not resist, but he could not draw her hands away from her face, and still she shook in his grasp, until at last he led her to the sofa, forced her to lie down. He leaped to the table to get some water, and as he turned the sobs stopped. Mrs. Caldecot sat up, her back to him, as if trying to hide her swollen face. The stiffness of her attitude terrified him, thawed the glacial coat of his good manners. He threw himself on his knees by the sofa, threw his arms about her, tried to force her to turn round.

"Don't," she said in a weak, even voice, "don't look at me, Stephen."

He was surprised to find himself fervent: "What do I care!" he said. As she turned, she let her head fall upon his shoulder. It fell heavily, fell with a suggestion of complete powerlessness. Britford felt as he had felt half his life, that he loved this woman, that she had for him something that no other woman had, that he wanted her happiness as much as his own, wanted to protect her and cheer her; he was all warmth. But he could not release his emotion; the compassed habits of a lifetime had hardened, desiccated him. He wanted to set before her the sumptuous feast of an eternal passion and the words would not come. So, in the extremity of his old desire, he bent down and kissed her lips. Mrs. Caldecot did not withdraw. Her swollen eyes were closed, and her lips made a slight movement as if she would return the caress. But it was hardly an intention, only a flicker. At first contact she had felt an immense comfort. To be held, to feel the solidity of another creature, it was physically good. She wanted to give herself to it, to surrender herself, to think no more, just to remit all her weakness, all her anguish to anybody who wanted it. But she could not do it. She was merely seized by a sort of emotional revolt actuated by no reasons. So her lips did not return the kiss: indeed, after a moment, she pushed Britford away. Quite careless of her red eyes, of her cheeks made sticky with powder and tears, she looked at him.

"I love you," said Britford. "Have I got to say it again?"

She did not at once reply. She looked with pleasure upon that intelligent, thin face, the calm eyes in which even now there was no ardor. "Don't, Stephen," she said. "Dear Stephen, you're my best friend, but let me go."

"Why should I let you go?" replied Britford, calmly. "When what I want to do is to hold you for the rest of your life?"

He looked at her, waiting for a clear answer to his clear question. Before she spoke he had wanted to overwhelm her with ardent caresses, but the intellectual question interested him more.

"I can't?" said Mrs. Caldecot, ignoring this. "You know I can't. If I could have, it would have been long ago."

"Oh, well," said Britford, as she freed herself completely and they stood face to face, "that's got nothing to do with it. I've always wanted you; I always shall, and I want you now."

"I can't, Stephen. Please don't hurt me. I've had enough the last two months."

"I know. That's why I'm asking you again."

"I know you know," said Mrs. Caldecot. "It doesn't matter."

"I don't understand," said Britford, twisting his watch chain. She knew this gesture. It meant that he was considering the situation judicially. "We can get married all right, if only you'll do it. I

can make arrangements to have Caldecot found, and there need not be much publicity over your divorce. We can do the thing quietly. I should say we could be married about this time next year."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Oh, you know quite well. Geoffrey won't give in like that."

"Then you'll marry me," cried Britford, seizing his advantage and for a moment warming.

"No. You don't see what I mean. If you did find Geoffrey he'd fight and . . . well, you know."

"I don't care," said Stephen. "Let Geoffrey charge you with anything he likes. You are you."

"Dear Stephen, why are you, a lawyer, trying to blind yourself as well as me to the fact that I shouldn't get a divorce? There, don't, dear. Don't you think I know? Don't you think I know that if I promise myself to you and I don't get my divorce we shall naturally . . . and I can't do that."

He did not at once reply. He liked to find Claire intelligent, but it annoyed him that she should be intelligent enough to discover his train of thought. So he generalized: "Oh, these things don't matter as much as you think."

"You mean that you'll take the risk of scandal, and all that? You would, of course, for you do love me, I know that, and it's sweet to think it, even though I suppose I've spoilt your life, taken you away from some woman who might have made you happy."

"No woman could have performed that service."

"Perhaps not. I'm sorry, Stephen. I wish somebody could have. But I can't. I really can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm so weak and so unhappy and so lonely now that if I were to give way, what do you think would happen? After a while, a year, a month, I don't know, when I felt stronger and safer, I'd find out that I'd made a mistake, that you were my dearest, my truest friend, but that I couldn't love you like that, that it would be unworthy of both of us. And I couldn't stay with you then."

"It seems to me," said Britford, holding his chin, "that there is a risk for me alone to face."

"No. I must face it too, and I can't. Oh, don't you understand what all this means to me? Suppose I were to do this and then repent it, again I'd be lonely and miserable. I'd have quarreled with you; then perhaps somebody else would think me just pretty enough to while away a year. I'd be miserable, and I'd give way, just not to be alone. I'd repent again. Or worse, perhaps, I might be discarded. I have been . . . twice."

"Now that is enough," said Britford, attempting masculine control. "Just you do what I tell you."

She eluded the hand he put out: "No, Stephen, it's no good. I can't be that sort of woman. I've been used to being loved all my life; I've been miserable and ill-treated sometimes, yes, but I've been loved. I can't let myself go to what would become

a habit, become a necessity. I can't be the sort of aging woman who clings to her lovers, who watches them, who's always afraid of her woman friends, who chooses them only among the unbeautiful and the faded, who makes a wall round her men, imprisons them."

"You'd never be . . ."

"Oh yes, I would be that sort of woman if I started. One can't help it. One wants to go on being young, being loved. Good heavens! don't we both of us know half a dozen women like that? Women who are tolerated by men who are tired of them, and don't want to be unkind to them; by men who don't know how to get out of their relation because they're afraid of a scene; men of honor, sticking to their old loves because it's the decent thing to do; and men that nobody else'll look at because they're the wrong class, or no good. That's what I'd become, Stephen, if I let myself go to this thing, for the sake of being loved again. Badly painted and badly dyed at fifty, wearing second-hand clothes, and sporting second-hand emotions, a nuisance, wearying men with attentions and women with woes, dull and pitiful, a subject for chatter, for contempt, for sympathy that is contempt in disguise . . . that would be me. And it shan't be, Stephen. I've loved and I've lost. All right; don't make it too hard for me. Don't join other people who don't know me as you do and don't understand me as you do. For God's sake let me die game."

As a natural reaction from her scene with Britford, Mrs. Caldecot took up her ordinary place in the world, met her friends, and after a little effort, found that she took a certain amount of pleasure in their society. But not in that of all of them. She found, notably, that she got on with women better than men. Men annoyed her; they seemed dense. This came to her most strongly at a dinner party where she arrived a little early, and where she found, with two women and the man of the house, the sort of nicely brushed, pleasant soldier who so often appears at a dinner party. Her host could not be a stupid man; though young, he was a quite prominent engineer; the soldier was a regular and a gunner; he must have gone to the Shop and have had some sort of intellectual training. Yet these four people, when Mrs. Caldecot arrived, were talking about knitting, and the engineer tried to pretend he knitted. When a pause occurred and Mrs. Caldecot mentioned some topic of the day, the soldier, almost like a shying horse, resumed the subject of knitting as if he were terrified by the thought that something might be said which would involve an opinion, reveal knowledge. Mrs. Caldecot wondered why she minded, for after dinner when the conversation, presumably owing to a regrettable accident, touched upon the unemployed, the engineer was aggrieved because he had seen a procession of unemployed behind the Boy Scouts' band. He felt that to lead the unemployed was not the func-

tion of the Boy Scouts. The affair annoyed him very much. They were all bad eggs who'd been tossed out of the army after a month as not being likely to make efficient soldiers. The other man contributed little except that he always referred to the men in question as "the so-called unemployed." He accompanied this with smiles indicating that it should be construed as a witticism.

Mrs. Caldecot agreed with their point of view; she was a Tory, and most of her views came from Bob, who was a Tory member of Parliament. But he had a different way of looking at these things. He thought that unemployment was inevitable, but at least he had some sort of theory on the subject and thought he knew why it was inevitable; he wanted, within the limits of his opinions, to do what he could to prevent it and to alleviate unemployment; he took it seriously. These men thought exactly like Bob, except that they didn't think. They paid Bob four hundred a year to do their political thinking, and it annoyed her to find them so obtuse, so devoid of gravity. It was that sort of thing that irritated her now in most men. From women she had never expected anything but pleasant chatter about people and frocks; from Bob she had taken all the mental stimulus she wanted, while other men appeared merely as necessary splashes of black and white at parties, creatures who opened doors and helped you into cars in a masculine way, by holding you under the arm with

which you were trying to climb in, and making it almost impossible for you to do so.

Mrs. Caldecot realized now that Bob had to her been man, and that all these people, whom she didn't know very well, and who were trying so hard not to give themselves away, were not supplying her with anything. Well, it couldn't be helped. It was part of the general grayness of the situation. She must make the best of it, and she was glad in a way that she had repulsed Britford. It was better to live without any man at all than with a man who only brought out by contrast with another his own lack of charm. She had no quarrel with Stephen Britford; he had accepted his defeat and was seeing her now and then, always cool, always relentless, no doubt, but she feared him no more. She saw the future a little more clearly: she would drug herself with small pleasures, waste all the time she could, reveal nothing of her anguish to the people she met. Perhaps they knew, though people seemed not to treat her otherwise than they did before. It tortured her at first to think that lots of people might know, that some were sorry, that some were glad to see her down, that others, like Britford, might be seeing their chance in it, and, most horrible of all, that she was being talked of at teaparties, that some people were saying she was taking it well, and others wondering what she would do. Well, let them talk; she'd give them no help; she'd neither boast her immunity nor seek comfort. She'd live silently, and she'd live alone.

CHAPTER VII

ALL IS OVER

WHEN Rodbourne closed the door of the garden room at Cantrel Court, he went along the corridor very slowly. He was horribly upset, for he knew how much Mrs. Caldecot must be suffering in that room where he had left her alone. He felt ashamed of himself. He had left her there, doubtless weeping. He remembered, and this memory hurt him, how once upon a time he had drawn a thorn out of her flesh so hard that after a moment she gave a cry; he looked up to see the face that had been set suddenly convulsed and the tears coming. Then he had seized her in his arms and begged her pardon for hurting her. She said: "Don't be as silly as I am, Bob. Go on, you must get it out." But after the thorn came out, while again she was laughing, for some time Rodbourne had been remorseful; he had had to hurt her, but it was dreadful to have hurt her at all. It was just like that to-day. Now again he had had to hurt her, without being able to help it, and he could not comfort her as once he had done. This wounded his masculine pride. If he had hated her,

he might have rejoiced in her suffering, but he still loved her in his way, and it was humiliating to think that he could not, with a caress and a kind word, as men do, heal her again.

"No," he thought, as he went upstairs to his bedroom. "I can't do anything for her now except let her alone." Then, as if to justify himself: "It's not my fault. What am I to do?"

He stayed in his bedroom for some time, though this was a strange thing to do at eleven o'clock in the morning. He did not just then want to meet his fellows. He wanted, in his tidy way, to sort out the situation and to decide what to do. But there was no situation at all to sort out, he knew that. Claire had thrown him up, and that was that. He was in love with Patricia, who was in love with him; he was to propose to her and marry her. Nothing very complicated there, but he was troubled by very confused emotions. Now, as he sat in an arm chair, chewing a pipestem he did not tell himself that he still loved Claire Caldecot, but he did not tell himself that he did not love her; he knew that Patricia drew him with a force that was irresistible, but yet he did not want to go to her yet and make all clear. He did love Patricia, he had known that for several days. Also, he knew that often, during the last year or two, in spite of her beauty, of her intelligence, something had seemed lacking in Mrs. Caldecot. She had a way of being tolerant to him which annoyed him; she had too many memories,

had met too many people. Also, they had experienced so much together, talked so much; he had no new stories for her, and she . . . oh, he hated to think of it, he knew too well the way she did things, the angle of her head as she wrote a note, just the smile she would give as she turned her head when he called her, just the way in which she slowly closed her eyes when he kissed her, and exactly the scent, the form of her lips. As he thought of this, a piteous sense of desolation came over him: he'd lost all those dear, intimate things. He forgot how stale they had grown, and he wanted them again; from the depth of his being rose the lover's eternal appeal, that old delights be made new, and thrills eternal. He was very unhappy, and he did not know what to do.

Then he looked up and down his room, for he saw quite well what he ought to do, and that was why he did not want to do it. Propose to Patricia! He rather wanted to just then. It was not only that her prettiness, her innocence attracted him, but here was somebody who was not stale, somebody who would surprise him by her gestures, her responses; it was also that here was something definite to do. If he engaged himself to Patricia, he felt that he would become free from his new sense of forlornness. It was as if he couldn't be without a woman. He reviewed Patricia; he recreated in his mind the small, round head with the curly hair, the parted pink lips, and the delicate shape. She was

very moving, and at that moment he wanted her. It would be adorable. She was the girl he wanted to end his life with; she would be such a little thing to protect and look after. That was very attractive after the breadth, the strength of Mrs. Caldecot's personality. But he did not want to go downstairs, since Patricia, who looked so upset, would probably be in her bedroom. He wasn't going to own up to himself that the most powerful of the influences that were holding him back was that he would probably have asked Patricia to be his wife if there had been no Mrs. Caldecot. What troubled him was not Mrs. Caldecot's claim, since she had resigned it, but the fact that she told him to go to Patricia, that she had in a way handed him over. He confessed this to himself after a few minutes, perhaps not quite so clearly as that. He put it to himself that he wasn't going to rush into this. He rather liked to think of himself as an impetuous man rushing into something, and this helped him to avoid the realization that he was not rushing, but being pushed.

The more Rodbourne thought about this, the more he disliked Patricia. He began to tell himself that after all he wasn't so sure as all that; he even tried to outrage his consciousness of love by using to himself the words "gone on her." He was afraid. He was trying to reduce the intensity of his attraction because he wanted to resist it, but did not know why he wanted to resist it. Perhaps because he

wanted to succumb to it. He would succumb, no doubt, because he wanted to resist, in a sort of reaction. This complicated emotion led Rodbourne to follow an entirely different idea. It was very pleasing to have an idea of his own, and it was this: he was awfully hurt by the way Claire had behaved. He knew quite well that she had every reason to get angry when she caught him kissing Patricia, but that wasn't reason to make an end of something that had been going on for eight years, just like that, in five minutes. It wasn't fair. That sort of thing wasn't done. He didn't want to be hard on Claire, so he wouldn't bring it up again, but he was hurt. He wouldn't have thought she'd have behaved like that. Dash it all! she knew what men were! She wasn't a kid. And she didn't let him explain, didn't give him a chance, just made a scene and smashed everything. It wasn't his fault. It did not then strike Rodbourne that anything might be his fault, for he was entirely masculine; the more he meditated, the more he saw himself as injured and misunderstood by both women. By degrees this transmuted itself into a sense of his own nobility. It was a pity to be misunderstood, but in such a world it was to be expected. Well, the only thing for him to do was to go back to town and to go on as if nothing had happened. After all, he was very comfortable in Whitehall Court, and he had lots to keep him busy. The session was going to be very heavy. Besides, he'd get about

a bit. Might have some fun. He smiled as he reflected that, after all, liberty is worth something; very vaguely, a world of women unfolded itself before him, exciting, stimulating. He might dance a bit more than he had done lately. He'd have more time, in a way, instead of almost every day having an appointment that clashed with another one. By the time these meditations came to an end, Rodbourne had attained a rather satisfied state of mind. There ran through it some forlornness, but it was mainly excitement. He did not then think that his parting with Mrs. Caldecot was final, but he wasn't going to do anything. If she made the first move he'd be decent about it. Damn it all! he was very fond of her, and after a scene like that they might call quits. He was rather misty as to his future with Mrs. Caldecot, combined with stimulating experiences. And Patricia muddled things somehow, but Rodbourne's main attitude was that henceforth he wasn't going to stand much from anybody.

When, however, he went downstairs again, he retired to the garage in a sort of despair to see the car towed out; after a melancholy lunch, where to his embarrassment both Patricia and Mrs. Caldecot appeared, both calm, perfectly polite, but rather silent and looking so ill that it was almost rude, he felt so uncomfortable that he went out immediately after lunch. Really, this was a bit too thick. They looked like a pair of ghosts, and Mrs. Headcorn noticed nothing at all, the great, fat porpoise. Jolly

good thing he was going next day; he couldn't stand much more of this sort of thing. Soon after, he left the house under a rain which decrepitated on his mackintosh; he continued to tell himself that this sort of thing was a damn shame. A profound conviction of the well-bred Englishman matured in him; these women really ought to keep up appearances.

But the walk was very long and very wet. He drank abominable tea, and ate bread and margarine in a public house. He discovered what he had suspected: that his right foot was very wet because there was a hole in the sole. On the way back bits of grit got through the hole and hurt him. As it was growing dark, he was not sure of his way; he was directed to a short cut by a well-meaning laborer, who apparently did not know the difference between his right and his left hand. Finally, Rodbourne arrived at Cantrel Court at half-past six, drenched, miserable, inclined to think that the world was a rotten place. Everybody had a rotten time. He included in this Mrs. Caldecot, who had preoccupied him more than Patricia, presumably because the walk was so wet that it disposed him to sorrow, rather than to the febrile expectations represented by Patricia. So, because he was so wet, he changed at once, and after a hesitation came downstairs half an hour before dinner. Contentedly, he sat down by the fire with the lunch edition of a London evening paper. He felt very comfortable in dry clothes. Also, there was a queer bit of news

about a split in the opposition. He didn't believe it, but this thing was coming up again and again. He decided to ring up next day a certain journalist who was supposed to know about these things. It was then that Mrs. Caldecot came into the drawing-room.

She had spent all the afternoon alternating between a mood of despair, which bade her go and lie down on her bed and stay there, and a mood of courage, when she talked to Mrs. Headcorn and even to Patricia. Perhaps she didn't like her so much as she had done before; she was less aware of the girl's charm and of her prettiness; indeed, she found it difficult to discover what Bob saw in the child, until she told herself with a smile that one seldom understood why lovers should select each other. No, she didn't like her, but she didn't dislike her. Patricia had become to her a sort of natural fact which leaves one neutral. Bob loved this girl; well, there was nothing more to say about it; he did. Mrs. Caldecot's emotions had by that time grown a little vague. She was no longer capable of feeling very intensely; some time would have to elapse before the strained cords of her emotions could again be made to vibrate. Besides, Patricia helped because she did not have the drilled courage of the older woman; she went upstairs, and did not come down again until nearly dinner time, pleading a headache. Mrs. Headcorn said she must on no account be disturbed, but went up with remedies three times in four hours, and once with tea.

It was probably the mood of courage which brought Mrs. Caldecot down so early. As she dressed, she shrank from the idea that once again she must meet Bob, try to be pleasant, try to be easy; again she was tempted to miss dinner, but she told herself that it wasn't fair to May. Patricia seemed so upset: perhaps she wouldn't come down, and it would be rather hard on May if two of her visitors abstained, for she was giving a little dinner that evening, and two people were coming in. "No," thought Mrs. Caldecot, "it won't do. I've got to play the game." To demonstrate to herself that she was not going to shirk, Mrs. Caldecot was ready at twenty to eight; finding Rodbourne in the arm-chair by the fire, she did not perceptibly hesitate, but went straight up to the hearth, and sat down, asking him evenly if there was any news.

"Nothing much," said Rodbourne, awkwardly.

Mrs. Caldecot hesitated. She wanted to be normal, but this was very difficult. So she pressed him: "No gossip?"

"Oh, the usual sort of thing," he replied, ungraciously, as he realized her effort. "They say Chale is going to resign, but as you know they've been saying that for the last three months."

"Yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, "but it might be true this time. And you know, it's just possible that it might be worth your while."

"My dear Claire," replied Rodbourne in the cool tone which he employed to her when she did not

agree with him, "you know quite well that Chale is only playing for the Cabinet, and if I run myself into the Harbor Office I'll get stuck there until the next election, and who's to know what'll happen in the mix-up? I might lose my seat."

"Oh don't be so silly, Bob," said Mrs. Caldecot, for a moment forgetting what had happened, and resuming her old rôle. "I know it was I prevented you taking the Undersecretaryship before, but times have changed. You know quite well that only a week ago Fitzwater Ingham told Arabella, who told me. . . ."

"And you told me," said Rodbourne savagely, "and told me every day that if only I'd be a dummy for a few months they'd give me a sugar stick like a nice little boy."

"No," said Mrs. Caldecot, with an air of superiority. "You only have to be a dummy until Doon takes a peerage."

"He won't."

"My dear boy, he will."

"What makes you think so?"

"The Liberal candidate in his division is retiring. So all the malcontents will vote Labor, just to get Doon out, and Doon will go down. He knows what is coming as well as we do: so he'll take a peerage to avoid it."

"Oh," said Rodbourne, thoughtfully, "there might be something in that." Then, as always in such discussions, he smiled and said: "You're not so useless after all."

Mrs. Caldecot did not reply, for this brought her back to the world of the day, so different from the world of the day before. She wanted to say: "What's the use? I can't help you now." But it was so dreadful, and she did not want her voice to tremble. So Rodbourne went on looking at her, disturbed now as her silence recalled to him the new situation. He felt clumsy; besides, now that she sat before him under the rose-shaded light, she looked different. Very beautiful. He did not know what pains she had taken over herself during the last half-hour; he did not realize that she had expended artifice on the rose of her cheeks, on the ordering of her hair, on bringing out with a touch of blue the mellow fullness of her eyelids, which now like faintly crumpled crêpe de Chine made two mauve zones of flesh upon whose moist and scented warmth he wanted to press his lips. Still she did not speak; still sat, firm hands negligent upon her lap. Her quietness exasperated him into activity. As he bent forward he murmured, hoarsely: "Claire, don't let's be fools. Let's wash out this morning."

She did not reply, she could not, for she was horribly tempted to hold on to this interest as well as to this old love. So again he pleaded: "I know I offended you, but the girl means nothing to me. It's you, only you. Won't you?" and, putting out a hesitating hand, he took hers.

For a moment Mrs. Caldecot submitted. She even slowly threaded her fingers through his, but as en-

couraged he stood up to take her into his arms, she saw him look to the right and left. She did not mind his prudence; he owed her that, but his glance recalled to her the morning's scene, unchained the train of thought which it had bred. No, it couldn't be. Dreams might be the stuff that worlds are made of, but one couldn't make a new world out of an old dream. So, quite gently, she pressed a hand against his shoulder and pushed him away.

The mood of courage was still upon her at dinner, where she had to meet a Mr. and Mrs. Trent, who lived a few miles away, at Burleigh Abbas. Just as she had that evening done all she could to enhance her beauty, so now did she labor to exhibit her social graces, to laugh at Mr. Trent's elderly jokes, to grow interested in Mrs. Trent's daughter, Isabel Quadring, a social leader of whom she had heard a few hints which she did not impart to Mrs. Trent. It seemed that Mrs. Trent had another daughter called Ursula, as to whom her mother was indefinite. Mrs. Caldecot was quick-minded enough to tell herself that Mrs. Trent had no luck with her daughters. So she laughed and induced conversation, was modestly racy, and watchful to assist Mrs. Headcorn in dragging into the conversation anybody who tried to find time to eat. She succeeded almost entirely, for a sort of despair seemed to have seized Rodbourne, who on the top of his sherry was drinking claret at the rate of two glasses for every course. After a period of sulkiness he had begun to talk to

Patricia, who was the only one whom Mrs. Caldecot could not quite move. But enough noise was made to cover her silence, and later, in the drawing-room, Mrs. Trent occupied herself with the girl, taking a gentle interest in mutual friends and making her almost tearful by recommending marriage for everybody to anybody as quickly as possible.

When the men came in, and it was decided to play bridge because everybody knew that otherwise they'd be bored before a quarter to eleven, Patricia at once declared that she was tired and wouldn't play. There was a determined scramble over the making up of the four; everybody offered to stand out; Mrs. Caldecot proving the most obstinate, while Mr. Trent wanted to cut out. But suddenly she noticed that Rodbourne was not protesting; she realized that he wanted to play, that he was nervous of Patricia. A sort of rage came upon her. Until then she had wanted to survive; now she wanted to precipitate her defeat. She wouldn't have him shirk, and so strong was her determination that when she took the pack the four submitted. With a little laugh she shuffled, and then cut. She replaced the pack so quickly that nobody noticed that at the bottom of the pack the cut had yielded a king. She spread the cards upon the table, and all drew, but she managed for a second to get into Rodbourne's way; as she herself drew she pushed toward Rodbourne two cards of which the king was uppermost; he of course picked it up. He was highest. After

a few protests against leaving out one of the two men, the four sat down to play, and Rodbourne was forced by custom to go and talk to the odd girl.

The two did not at first say very much. Rodbourne was looking over a book of views of Venice, in which Rodbourne had to interest himself. They talked vaguely of Venice, Italy, places which Patricia had not visited. They made uninteresting remarks upon the weather, and hoped that it would be fine next day. Rodbourne by degrees grew exasperated by the girl's silence, for she answered him only "yes" and "no," or "do you think so?" At that moment he did not like her very much, but at last, as she felt that he was forcing her, as she thought there must be something false in this interest, she looked up at him. There was so much uncertainty, unhappiness in the bright blue eyes, that he, too, suddenly grew silent. That look seemed to say to him: "Why do you torture me? Why have you done me some harm I don't understand? You, a man, to a little girl like me?" He felt guilty, and glanced toward the bridge table to see if their confusion was observed, but fortunately at Cantrel Court bridge was played on the lines of a bargain sale, in the midst of controversy and denunciation; mistakes two hands old were dragged out and flung into the new one. Also, Mr. Trent all the time told his wife what he thought of her.

So the silence of the couple on the sofa was not observed, but it troubled them both all the same,

and the man, unable to find anything to talk of, was nervously divided between the wet weather and hopes of the morrow.

"I think it's clearing up," he said, looking toward the window. "I think I see the moon." Obediently, Patricia looked toward the embrasure where the window was set. "Yes," said Rodbourne, getting up. "I don't think it's raining." He went toward the window; as if drawn by habit of response rather than by desire, Patricia followed him. They were thus slightly isolated, for the embrasure jutted forward about three feet; for a moment they stayed there together, looking into the blackness of the night where the skyline was indicated only by a darkness almost as great. They were disturbed and did not know how to end their disturbance. Each wanted to speak, and each was afraid of saying something that mattered. So for some moments the tension grew, until at last the man, more active, more impatient, had to speak: "I say, they'll be hours over their rubber. Nobody's got a game yet. They're making such a noise."

"Yes, they are rather," said Patricia, "and I've got such a headache."

"Well," said Rodbourne, hesitating, "let's . . . why not go into the garden room for a moment?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Do come. There's a fire."

"I think I ought to go to bed," said Patricia. As she said this she moved him. She was so pretty

that night. She wore the sort of little frock which the dressmaker at Plymouth supplies to the backwoods of the county, a silly little frock of cream muslin, much too high both at the back and in front. And she had run something that looked like silver tape round the decolletage, giving a final touch of chastity to the skirt by interspersing rosebuds in the ruche at the bottom. And yet it wasn't hideous. It was innocent, childish. The cream enhanced the whiteness of the skin; the high decolletage brought out the slimness of the neck. She stood before him, her head a little thrown back, so very helpless that he felt once more that desire to protect and make her happy. So strong did this grow that rather roughly he said again:

"Come along," and she followed him.

As soon as they reached the garden room Patricia sat down before the fire, her hands clasped about her knees, and stared into the flames. Rodbourne did not sit down. He stood by her side, looking at the downcast, curly head. She did not move, this little figure, and the writhing flames flung orange shadows upon the smooth arms. She was such a little thing, and he was immensely tempted to bend down suddenly and press his lips upon her neck, just where the dark tendrils of hair shaded into down. Yes, he could do that, reconquer her. It was intensely moving, this desire of his, and he remembered the cool, unscented contact of her fresh mouth. But he was afraid; he wanted to conquer

her and yet not to; he shrank from decisive gestures, for he had that day experienced too much emotion. So he thought: "Can't go on like this. Must say something." But he could not find anything to say; all active ideas were in him obliterated by his blind desire to obtain once more from her the caresses which would make him forget, which would snatch him up into a world of excitement, make nothing of prudence, disperse loyalty, and provide the exquisite moment which he might bid tarry.

Still Patricia did not move; her attitude suggested that she was worn out, that she had lived that day in a turmoil of excitement which her slight physique and her emotional experience were unfit to meet. She sat there as if wretched and astray, not knowing what had been done to her, and miserable in this ignorance. The attitude was so pronounced that Rodbourne understood it. The girl was exhausted, but now it was not pity that he felt, nor protective desire; it pleased him to think that he had brought her to this point, that it was love for him reduced her; his understanding made her his. So, as if to consecrate his triumph, to make it manifest to himself, he suddenly gave way to that temptation. Throwing his arms round the slim body he pressed his lips just where he had aimed his eyes, upon the slim bent neck. As the first physical excitement passed away he expected her either to struggle or to respond, but not to stay, her head still bent, her hands still unstirred,

as if she were saying to him: "Kiss me if you want to; it doesn't matter." His male pride revolted against this. Needing to affirm himself, he drew her to her feet, and, holding her close, tried to reach her lips. But here the distraction of innocence intervened: Patricia drew back as if afraid and turned her head away.

"Why not?" he whispered.

"Don't. Let me go. Please."

"I won't let you go. Not now. Or ever."

"Let me go, please. You know you don't mean it." Her voice was so cold that he released her. But as she made a movement toward the door he intercepted her. Now indeed he wanted her, and was certain that he must not let her go; if she went now she went entirely. The girl stopped, looked at him without fear, made safe by the hardness of youth: "Please don't do that," she said. "I want to go."

He snatched her hand. "Look here," he said. "I'm not surprised you're angry. It's my fault. I was a fool this morning. But I want you to marry me."

She stared at him. Then, after a pause: "I don't believe it."

"But, good heavens, why not? Is it because I kissed you before? . . ."

"Oh no, of course not," as if she were tired of explaining. "Of course it isn't that. Only you don't love me."

"Yes, I do," said Rodbourne. "I'm asking you to marry me. Don't you understand?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you. Aren't you going to answer me?"

She hesitated. Already he had great power over her, this tall, fair man, but she was suspicious of something she could not define; something stood between and separated them. She did not know what it was, but her instinct, the unconscious observations she must have made during the week, all these held the two apart. He was not moving her, and all she wanted was to get away. But suddenly Rodbourne said in a new, veiled voice: "And you? Do you love me?"

At these words, for which she was unprepared, a sudden terror came over the girl. They terrified her because they forced her to view herself, to realize the irresistible impulse that was dragging her toward the man whom, she didn't know why, she felt she couldn't get. For a moment she stood there in conflict. Then, as she acknowledged to herself her degrading state, an immense pity for herself seized her. Flinging herself upon the sofa, she wept, hiding her eyes with one hand and searching stupidly for her handkerchief. Rodbourne flung his arms round her, murmuring words of comfort, of apology and love; now and then, he forgot his sympathy to cover with kisses the flushed cheek, to seek the lips that did not resist; he tried

to tear from the weeping eyes the trembling hand. When she had ceased to cry, again he strove to force her promise, but Patricia was exhausted and would not answer him. He realized at last that if he tortured her any more he would only bring on another fit of tears. So, in a good-humored tone, he said: "Look here, I don't know what's the matter; you're upset, but it's all right, isn't it?" She did not reply. "You do understand it'll be all right, don't you?" She nodded. "Well, I won't trouble you any more. We're all going back to-morrow. May I come and see you there?"

"If you like."

"All right. I suppose we'd better go back." As she got up he took her hand, hesitating for a moment, but her frightened eyes forbade an embrace, so he raised her hand to his lips and for a second considered the thin, rosy fingers. She remained calm, only half-conscious that he was going to kiss her hand. But as he gently turned it palm upward, and there in its warm, scented hollow pressed a heavy caress, as he molded her lax fingers about his chin, her childish coldness revolted and she pulled her hand away.

It was on impulse, because he had not at the moment been able to let her go, that Rodbourne had asked leave to call on Patricia in town. Just then, with his emotions stirred, he had only wanted to see her again by herself, to make her understand and to gain her. He was surprised when, a few

days later, he found himself involved in an ordinary courtship. He did not perceive it at first, for the day he came to tea at the house in Old Quebec Street, which Mrs. Neale had taken for three months, another man was already there, and later several people came in. He had no chance to talk to Patricia, because her mother left her to do the pouring out for the small party. Indeed, Mrs. Neale quite embarrassed him by devoting to him too much personal attention. For Mrs. Neale was only thirty-nine, and still very pretty, slim brunette, quite unlike her daughter, more vivacious and far better dressed. All these facts were forced upon Rodbourne because he was no longer the enthusiastic young man who saw perfection only in the object of his passion. Indeed, that afternoon, after chatter of plays, golf, and the latest book of memoirs, wasting an hour on the sweepings of ideas which make up London conversation, he went away rather irritated. Patricia had not said much. Too busy, no doubt, but it annoyed him. Only once had she done anything personal. At something he said, and it wasn't brilliant, she had remained holding up the sugar tongs, looking at him intently; then she had blushed, as if at her own thought, and this had moved him.

So it developed into an ordinary courtship, into the usual vanquishing of social difficulties. First he lunched at the house; then he met Patricia at the dance; then, as the normal progress will have

it, he went to a dance because she had told him she would be there. He took her to see some pictures one afternoon, and felt ridiculous, vaguely afraid of being seen and pointed at, he a man nearly forty years old with a girl half his age. Also, somehow, he wasn't progressing; it was as if his critical sense of Patricia's girlish imperfections held him back. Seen like this among London women, some of them so perfectly worked in white, black, and crimson, so assured, with their voices so definitely placed when uttering definite points of view, she seemed . . . provincial. She was shy, and he hated her being shy, though he would have hated her bold. Sometimes, when he thought of themselves married, he told himself that would be all right. She wouldn't be shy then, and she'd learn to wear her clothes. He'd put that right, go to the dressmaker with her, and tell her the things to say, and help her to behave. It was very fascinating, that sort of day-dream, and he liked to picture himself going to her bedroom in the morning, sitting on the bed, and explaining to her the contents of the newspaper. Only one detail interfered with that particular vision: the occasional recurrence of a rather similar scene, where the head upon the pillow was black and smooth instead of curly brown.

He had not seen Mrs. Caldecot again. A month had passed, and they had exchanged no letters, though often he had needed her, had been puzzled to decide some point where her instinct would have been

helpful. But he had maintained his offended mood. He had been ill-treated, and he wasn't going to take the first step. Now and then his isolation almost overwhelmed his pride. For such a long time he had had by his side a woman to love him, who understood his temperament, knew all his affairs, and was fit to consult. He needed a woman, if only to hold a woman's hand and gain a sort of lucidity from the contact. He couldn't get that from Patricia, though he did love her, love her as a man does, as something to own. When he talked politics to her, she always agreed with him; of course he wanted woman to agree with him, but not so easily. Rather than a woman to agree with, he wanted a woman to convince. Patricia didn't know anything. Of course, she would when they were married; he'd educate her and make quite a different woman of her. That was charming, and he liked to dream of these initiations, but meanwhile he needed a woman so badly that, suddenly, without knowing how it happened, he had a shameful little adventure in the street, the sort of thing he hadn't done for twenty years.

It was this probably that brought him closer to Patricia, a sort of remorse, a sense of defilement. She seemed so pure and waxlike after the strident night. He nearly repeated his proposal that afternoon. He had taken her to a matinée, and as neither was dining out, they had time to waste and walked home through the Park. The sun had not yet set,

but the twilight was falling like golden gauze, cut up by the buds that shone like jade on the sooty branches of the trees. As they went, the girl, excited by the play, talked disjointedly of people they knew, of the actor who had played the comic butler, whom Patricia would like to take back to Wrayford; he was filled with a sense of her youth, with her unformed quality, and he delighted in it. Some question, now their familiarity was established, caused Patricia to let out with a laugh a little secret: it wasn't wonderful that Mrs. Neale troubled so little about her daugher. Mrs. Neale wasn't exactly engaged, but she did have a leaning toward . . .

"Not Chris?" asked Rodbourne, laughing.

"Yes," said Patricia. "It seems funny, but everybody calls him Chris. After all, why not? He's not fifty, and if I must have a stepfather, he's rather a dear."

Rodbourne did not reply until they reached the Park, for they were crossing Hyde Park Corner and he enclosed in one hand the slim forearm.

"Why not?" he said, a little later, as he pictured the smart though rather stout clubman whom everybody called Chris, which was a tribute to his amiability. But he said no more, for this talk of marriage embarrassed him. They passed Stanhope Gate before they spoke again, and Patricia felt awkward because she could think of no chatter. As they went on Rodbourne was telling himself:

"She's adorable. I don't think I'd like to have her different." In that moment he liked her imperfect clothes, her modest gaze, her hesitations, he told himself opposite Aldford House, while he was thinking of a way to put it. He became agitated as they approached Marble Arch, for he didn't want to be blunt. Just as he was going to speak, he observed a set of two couples upon a bench, close embraced, and quite careless of each other. He thought: "I can't say it here. It seems so undignified." Then Patricia did the silly thing that girls do out of nervousness. She glanced sideways at the couples and remarked:

"Don't they look happy?"

"Very," said Rodbourne, in a cold tone. How could she say such a thing! How could she notice them? She saw them, yes, she couldn't help that, but she needn't let on. It was almost vulgar. He rather disliked her as he left her at the house, and they made no other appointment.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Neale, busy as she was considering Chris, had noticed what was going on. She would have said nothing about it, being wise enough to let her daughter do her own mating, if her friend Mrs. Palling had not opened the subject.

"I like your new friend, Mr. Rodbourne," said Mrs. Palling, who, though very heavy in body, was very nimble in mind when it came to these things.

"Yes," said Mrs. Neale, "he's rather nice. We've only known him a couple of months."

"Patricia seems to get on with him so very well," said Mrs. Palling. "But I shan't give them a grand piano. Too expensive."

Mrs. Neale laughed: "Babe, you burn me up," having recently learnt this expression from an American peeress. "That's all your imagination."

"Not at all. Every time I've been here he's been here; he's been seen with Patricia at the Independent Arts Show, and he lunched her yesterday."

"Millicent, your intelligence department is wonderful."

"I can see what's before my nose," said Mrs. Palling. "But why do you deny it? Want him yourself? All right, all right; I'm not trying to be rude. I know you're not a Mormon."

"You've got it wrong, Milly. There are no female Mormons."

"Oh, aren't there!" said Mrs. Palling. "But that's not what I'm talking about; I mean to say, wouldn't he do?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Neale, "I've got nothing against him. He's quite brilliant, and I hear they offered him the Harbor Office a month ago."

"He wouldn't take it," said Mrs. Palling, "because if he had he'd have been stuck in a minor office and the party would have thought they'd given him enough. He would have taken it if Tommy Doon had decided to take a peerage, because that would have cleared Mr. Rodbourne's way to the Cabinet. Only something happened that's too long to tell you.

Tommy Doon's staying in the Commons, and the Harbor Office wasn't worth while."

"Millicent, you really amaze me, with the things you know. Can you tell me whether Mr. Rodbourne has proposed to my daughter? and in case she has accepted him, do you know the day they've fixed for their marriage? It would be awfully convenient to know."

"Well," said Mrs. Palling, seriously, "I don't know exactly, but I should say he proposed to her the other day, when you were staying at May Headcorn's, and she refused him."

"But," said Mrs. Neale, ceasing to smile, "do you mean all this?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Palling, "it's like this. You know it's all over between him and Mrs. Caldecot?"

"I had heard something about them, though I wasn't sure."

"Of course, it wouldn't get to Devonshire. But it's off, my dear. Mrs. Caldecot was dining somewhere where I was, and I don't know her very well; but she was so cheerful, she was the life and soul of the party, and I said to myself: that woman's done. Well, that was just after you came back. He dropped her at Cantrel Court."

"But what makes you think? . . . And of course Patricia doesn't know anything about this?"

"No?" said Mrs. Palling. "She doesn't know, but she feels. I haven't got any daughters; you have, that's why you don't understand them."

"Oh," said Mrs. Neale, after a time, "I see. You think that she refused him, and now he won't take no for an answer . . . and that's why he's taking her about such a lot. I really ought to do something, Millicent; only Chris has been worrying me such a lot lately."

"Don't do anything," said Mrs. Palling, impressively. "It seems to me a very good match; he's thirty-nine, yes, and she's twenty. It does make a difference, I know. But like that he won't get sick of her so early. He's quite well off. He's just sold fourteen hundred acres at Seton Manor for a very good price, my dear. And he'll be in the Cabinet. Besides, you'd be getting her out of the way for when you marry Chris."

Mrs. Neale laughed. One couldn't be offended with this gadabout. Also, the last point of view appealed to her.

At the very end of April, for the first time since their parting, Rodbourne unexpectedly met Mrs. Caldecot. It was at one of those colossal at-homes in a house easily accommodating four hundred guests, where about six hundred had come and brought their friends. Half-way up the stairs he tried to turn round and go away, but the incoming crowd would not let him. So ultimately he was forced into the drawing-room, exchanging grins and elbow jabs with a crowd that shrieked like parrots. Suddenly a drift in the mob carried him against a marble pillar bearing a bust. . . . Against the pillar, upon which

she rested a gloved hand, Mrs. Caldecot was leaning while she talked to a fresh-faced boy. Though separated by two women they saw each other. Mrs. Caldecot faltered, and a rush of blood went up to her forehead. She began talking nonsense to the boy, who looked up at her with adoring eyes. He was eighteen, and had never met anybody so beautiful as Mrs. Caldecot. Rodbourne found himself smiling mechanically. His heart was beating. He knew that he must go up to her, shake hands, be normal. But he couldn't get to her just then, because the two women were in the way, and so for a moment he looked at her, awaiting his chance. The flush had died away; Mrs. Caldecot stood exactly under the chandelier where were burning some dozens of lights. The white glare struck her directly upon the forehead, for she was wearing a little Russian-looking hat of black velvet with scarlet trimming. There was no brim to protect her. She stood gabbling to the entrancing boy, while the light flung upon her chin shadows from the slightly pendulous cheeks, emphasized the vertical folds about her mouth, and darkened the sagging chin. When at last Rodbourne managed to get to her, they had very little to say. Their hands released each other easily. She told him she was quite well. He said he hadn't taken the Harbor job after all. She said that perhaps he had been right. Then, that she must hurry away.

Rodbourne paused for a moment in Portman Square. His emotions were conflicting. She was very dear to him still; it had been good to clasp her hand, but he was oppressed by the marks he had seen, by a sense of ravage. She was old. She had grown old, not as a wife grows old, very slowly, in the same house, in the performance of the same tasks, in the pursuit of the same interests. It had not happened like that, in a way one could forgive if one noticed it. She had just grown old.

He stared through the railings into the square, and by degrees his unhappiness disappeared. Claire was old. She had released him. It was over. It was really over because she was old. Then he found himself drawing a breath of relief. The memory of Claire, of her sweetness, it was that had enthralled him and set up a barrier between himself and Patricia. That barrier was down. Indeed, in that moment, he reacted violently from the past, and thus turned toward the youth which Patricia offered him. Oh, he had no doubts about it: he was man of the world enough to realize the effect that he, urbane, polished, sure of himself, and splendidly mature, must make upon this girl, this little girl. So he hesitated no more, crossed the square, and within two minutes was at Mrs. Neale's door. Yes, Miss Patricia was in. The maid would see whether she'd gone up to dress yet.

Rodbourne waited nervously in the drawing-room decorated with a great many photographs in silver

frames. He chid himself; why should he be so absurd? But when Patricia came in, she stayed for a moment by the door, looking at him seriously, half-afraid, and still submissive, as if she said: "Why, have you sent for me, Master?" She moved him profoundly, standing thus. She seemed such a slight prey for the male appetite. So his voice was soft as he said, "Patricia, you know what I've come to say to you, don't you?"

She did not reply, so he said again, "Don't you?"

Thus forced, and looking away, in a tremulous voice she replied, "I think so."

Then, feeling secure, he strode across the room and took her into his arms. For a second she was rigid, as if defending for the last time her passage from one state to another. Then, and before he could kiss her, all sweetness and innocence, she laid her head against his shoulder. He bent his lips to her downcast cheek, accepting her abdication.

Mrs. Caldecot put down the newspaper. She had no taste for it. She picked up a letter which had slipped into her bed, read it again. It did not interest her. She yawned, picked up the paper again. After all, she supposed one must know what was going on. Thus, with a hardly perceptible stiffening, as if her proud spirit controlled her nerves, she read:

"A marriage has been arranged between Robert Nairn Rodbourne, M. P. for East Farnshire, only

son of Lieut. General Kenneth Nairn Rodbourne and Mrs. Rodbourne, of Seton Manor, Jedley, Salop, and Patricia, younger daughter of the late N. M. Neale, Financial Commissioner of the Gulf Straits and Mrs. Neale of Wrayford, Devonshire."

CHAPTER VIIII

DOPE

VERY slowly, Mrs. Caldecot went down the gravel path which wandered between the lawns yellow green as chrysoprase. In the great heat of June, Cantrel Court and its grounds lay dusty and twinkling. She went on, eyes upon the blinding, gritty ground, thoughtless, and for a moment relieved by the beat of the rays upon her back through her thin blouse. By her side Chang trotted sagely, enjoying the warmth, his nose, black as a truffle, raised toward her as if he expected her to do for his sake something athletic. She went on slowly until she reached the flower garden. Though the late Mr. Headcorn had shown himself an imaginative but eccentric architect, he was an excellent gardener. So Mrs. Caldecot was able to stand still and to take a sensuous pleasure in the multicolored radiance of the flowers. The flowers bloomed with a kind of careless profusion, without order. A great mass of dahlias held out crimson or flesh-colored quills by the side of a regiment of unbending gladiolas, whose scarlet emphasis brought out the pallor of some little yellow roses, tender as the

skin of an Oriental maid. They were crowded in the broad bed, pink-belled snapdragon and begonia purse-proud and overfed, by the side of sweet-williams, whose hemstitched eyes disapproved of their excess. But more than anything the row of sweet peas held her idle eyes. They were crowded and unruly, satisfied to expand against each other, making a soft quilt of purple, pale pink, pale blue, among which the white petals created contrast and gave relief. They were rich and debonair; they hung their heavy heads upon their stalks, and strove for mutual mastery in a clasp that was an embrace rather than a threat, like pigmies contending. Mrs. Caldecot for a while looked down on all this energy, while Chang, disappointed and bored, goggled his eyes at her, showing their skim-milky whites and breathing hard with impatience. She noticed him at last and bent down to pat him; he gave a throaty wheeze, and suddenly trotted off, his retroverted muzzle striving to discover moist scents in the sun-caked earth.

Mrs. Caldecot was still looking at the sweet peas, taking, in their beauty, an obscure satisfaction mixed with pain. They were so alive, and it was a joy that they should be; they bore witness in their fashion to the eternity of desire, to the persistence of impulse. They would seed themselves in an unconscious act of love, and painlessly their seed should bring forth, knowing no passion, nor hope, nor danger, only the quick scissors which they

could not foresee. Mrs. Caldecot told herself that consciousness was an overrated privilege, and she could not help wondering then why, from the first day, when man built a fetish, he had hoped to live another life, to survive personally, just as he was. He must want that, or why survive? He must want to survive just as he was, with the same interests, the same ambitions, the same loves. But did he? Did the clerk in the city really want all through eternity to be the man who every morning caught the 8.44? If he didn't do that, he wouldn't be himself. Or did that clerk, in Moslem fashion, conceive some eternal paradise where gingerbeer would be free, when on a pier always dark he would hold a hand eternally fair? And she asked herself what she would say to Mephistopheles if he were, with his offer, to spring out of those sweet peas. She wondered what any woman would ask of Mephistopheles, and was quite sure that almost any woman would deal with him, the soul being after all a thing which for most of them had only a Sunday value. Youth she supposed, they'd all ask for youth, for all the old agonies over again. And, of course, all the old joys. Only fools would ask for wealth, or rank, or fame; the wise ones would know that with youth they might gain the rest.

Suddenly she told herself, "I wouldn't ask him to give me back Bob." She did not fully express what she really meant. At that moment, on this

flaming day at the end of June, under the screaming purple of the sky, in the passionate exuberance of flower life, she felt it a weariness to be alive, to be so little alive in the midst of emphatic Nature. No, she wouldn't go through it again, once more be charmed and then betrayed, once more feel and then react. She'd give Mephistopheles the best bargain he'd ever had; she'd ask him to give her the courage to go that night to Basingalton and throw herself into the swift little stream which rushed round the bend beyond Basing Bridge. She thought: "I can't do it," and she despised herself, for what after all was there to hold her back? What had she got in life? What lay before her? To grow older, more lonely, to do a lot of silly things, to cause time to go by, and to find that time didn't go very fast? What a coward she was! There was nothing for her now, nothing really, and no doubt what stopped her was some superstitious fear that after all there might be another side, and that there she might find something, something vindicative. She laughed. Shakespeare thought of that before she did. Her cowardice added to her existing humiliation and made it almost intolerable. For Mrs. Caldecot, though she was intelligent, though she possessed a sense of humor, was not free from the little evils of pride; she could see herself as she was, a woman whom once men had admired, who had known complete love, and now was discarded by the only man she had ever loved. Discarded! and so

completely that she did not desire to live over again.

"Isn't this a lovely day?" said Mrs. Headcorn, who had come to her side unobserved. "I'll have to cut some of those sweet peas, but they grow so fast in this weather that I wonder whether we'll have enough bowls. I tell you what, we'll send some to the orphanage."

"I'm sure the orphans would prefer strawberries," said Mrs. Caldecot, instinctively normal.

"Oh, we haven't got enough of them."

Mrs. Caldecot did not reply while Mrs. Headcorn went on talking, passing swiftly from criticisms of the garden to scraps of gossip about the neighborhood. She did not notice that Mrs. Caldecot was not responding, until her friend replied to a remark of Suki's health, which was then not very good, in a way so inappropriate that Mrs. Headcorn realized that she was not listening. She was not offended; she was not very good at perceiving people's moods; as Mrs. Caldecot herself once put it, May didn't always see things that were before her nose, but she did see them if one hit her on the nose with them. She slipped a fat and rather moist hand behind Mrs. Caldecot's arm, and was surprised and shocked when at this contact Mrs. Caldecot's rigid attitude changed and she flung herself crying into her arms.

Mrs. Headcorn didn't say anything, for she did not know what to say. She patted the big, heaving

shoulder and made comfortable noises. She was quite surprised when suddenly Mrs. Caldecot released herself and, turning away, wiped her eyes, powdered herself with feverish hands. At last Mrs. Headcorn felt that she must say something: "Claire," she whispered, "isn't it getting any better?"

"No," said Mrs. Caldecot, and, in a trembling voice: "I can't get used to it."

"I know," said Mrs. Headcorn, sympathetically, "when Charlie died . . ."

Mrs. Caldecot turned on her in a sort of rage: "Oh, you're all right; Charlie died. I know you were fond of him, I don't mean that, only he died. Don't you see? That made an end of it, and you can tell yourself that if he'd gone on living it'd be all right between you and him. But Bob's not dead."

Something in her tone shocked Mrs. Headcorn. "Don't talk like that," she whispered. "It sounds as if you wanted Bob to be dead."

"Perhaps I do," said Mrs. Caldecot. "Oh, no, don't listen to me. I don't, really I don't. It wasn't his fault. Oh, May, I promise you, I'm glad, really."

"I think you're saying too much," said Mrs. Headcorn. "You can't be glad."

"Yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, reflectively, "yes, I can be glad. It isn't my fault that I'm a woman, that I still care for him, that in some moments I'd

like to shoot them both. I can't help it, but I'm glad all the same. It's the right thing for him to do."

"He was all right as things were," said Mrs. Headcorn, grudging.

"No. Not really. Patricia's going to give him everything he needs. She'll love him."

"Not like you," said Mrs. Headcorn, the partisan.

"Perhaps not. I don't think anybody could. But she'll love him quite enough, love him as he's got to be loved, like a grown-up man, a man who's perhaps going to be famous." She sighed: "She'll sit at the head of his table, where I could never sit; give him children that I could never give him. It'll make him happy, for he likes being a social figure, the dear, brilliant baby; and he'll like on Sunday afternoons going to the Zoo, hand in hand with a little boy and a little girl. Perhaps he'll call the little girl Claire."

Mrs. Headcorn looked as if she were going to cry. "You sound so bitter," she said.

"I'm not. I'm only trying to see things as they are. And I suppose you think I'll let him go like that."

"You don't mean? . . ."

"Oh, May, don't be so thick. Of course I'm not going to try to get him back. I know what you think. But I can't let him go quite. It's asking too much of me. I'll always be there. Why not? Patricia likes me, I think. So I'll go to their house, and by degrees, when Bob realizes that I'm safe,

that I'm not going to entangle him again, yes, entangle, let's face things straight if we can't face them bravely, when he feels safe I'll just be his friend. I'll just be the woman with whom he discusses his affairs. I couldn't let that go."

"Patricia won't like it."

"She won't at first. But as I let my hair grow gray, which I shall, as I turn out to be the convenient person who can be rung up in the morning to come to dinner when a guest is ill, who takes the children to the seaside when Bob and Patricia want to go honeymooning in Greece—well, I shall have started by being Claire; I shall become dear Claire; I shall end as poor Claire. But I'll still be there, and don't say I've got no pride, for it's true, I haven't; I only have spasms of it; at bottom I'm like any woman who is really in love; I don't mean a woman with her sense of romance titillated, but a woman who's really in love: when a woman's like that she's just abject."

"I do wish you wouldn't say those things," said Mrs. Headcorn. "You make me so uncomfortable."

"Whom else should I say them to?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, squeezing the fat arm. "Is there anybody else in the world before whom I'd give myself away like this? You know there isn't. That's why I love you, you fat old idiot, because you never understand me but always tolerate me."

"No. I don't understand that, for instance, but I suppose it's clever."

Mrs. Caldecot laughed. "I don't know what I should do without you. Whenever I want to clear up my emotions and tear up the old ones, you're the only possible waste-paper basket. Don't get offended: offense does not suit your curves."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs. Headcorn. "But what I want to know is: what are you going to do with yourself?"

"Oh, dear, I've just been telling you, but I suppose you mean the other things, all the things that don't count. Well, of course I'm going to do them; I'm going to join societies and committees, and go in for philanthropic and social reforms, and religions, if they're comfortable, and never have a meal alone if I can help it, and appear at the Botanic, at the Albert Hall bazaars, at the Horse Show, the Dog Show, and the Cat Show; and I'll go on the river, and to Cannes, and to Toormina, and to St. Moritz. And when I've got nothing else to do I shall have a row with the telephone. Oh, I'll be busy."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Headcorn, solemnly, "that if all that doesn't count, well, you'll be busy when you do the things that do count."

Mrs. Headcorn was right, in a way. In her despair, in her contempt for the trifling attractions of her period, Mrs. Caldecot had underrated the influence of the agitated life. She had told herself that she would live hurriedly so as to convince herself that she was still alive, but she did not know how exacting trifles could be. She found it needed

courage to subject herself to them. Her first impulse had been to let things go. Some of the chair covers should go to the cleaner, but what did it matter? Let them get dirty, since there was nobody to keep them clean for. For some days she hardly went out; she brushed her hair and somehow packed it up, told the cook to send up anything she liked; for the first time in her life, except during house-moving or on arriving from journeys, Mrs. Caldecot dined in a coat and skirt. It was this dramatic fact that probably shook her out of her lethargy. Not to dress for dinner, to deprive the occasion of a ceremony to which it was entitled. . . . One evening she realized that she was slipping from the group that dresses into the group that does not, and that perhaps she would slide into the group which before dinner does not wash. She was ashamed; she vaguely excused herself to Maud who every night had punctually laid out an evening frock for her, by muttering something about not having felt very well lately. Maud was perfect; she seemed to understand that Mrs. Caldecot wanted to react, and so, that night, as if by household conspiracy, there were more flowers than usual on the table, the dinner was very delicate, and Maud dressed Mrs. Caldecot in her frock of flame brocade with the voile sleeves edged with monkey fur. Mrs. Caldecot liked herself, and, after a moment's hesitation, went to her jewel case and clasped round her neck the necklace of pigeon-blood rubies which . . . well, what

did it matter if it was Bob who'd given them to her? They were hers, she thought defiantly, and went downstairs.

It was after that reaction that Mrs. Caldecot went out, was seen, and disregarded possible gossip. She became very busy, so busy that sometimes she was wearied by having too much to do. After a moment's hesitation, London society probably ceased to commiserate with her; instead of wondering how she was taking it, it decided that she was taking it very well; so it helped her to live. One evening, as she got into bed, a little after one o'clock, she found herself wakeful; the preoccupations of the day were still upon her. Yes, it had been a long day. First she found herself in a housekeeping mood and investigated the stores which the cook artfully constituted by ordering whenever she could a quarter of a pound too much of everything, and hiding the result at the back of a large drawer in the dresser. The fact that the ironing rug was placed innocently in front of the groceries, and that the cat slept on the rug with an air of still greater innocence, did not save the cook from Mrs. Caldecot's investigations. Then she had a conversation with Maud and was reassured as to the urgency of Maud's young man. Then the plumber came to mend the kitchen range, and Mrs. Caldecot had to face the coalition of the plumber, his mate, and her two servants; they wanted new plates, a new cinder tray, possibly a new range. So Mrs.

Caldecot fought gallantly, had the cinder tray mended, and insisted upon the broken plates being joined up with steel stanchions. She went away rather pleased with herself, and quite sure that the plumber would report her to his firm as a democrat, but no lady. She passed the rest of the morning matching a new evening frock with silk stockings, which proved the usual lengthy and maddening adventure. For, as usual, the only available stockings seemed to be one shade darker or one shade lighter. She got home only in time to repair the disorder caused by matching to go to a lunch party quite near, where everybody knew everybody, and talked a lot, and very loud, and they all had just a little more to drink than they should in the early afternoon. Mrs. Caldecot rather enjoyed herself, and a woman confided to her something she called a secret: everybody knew about it, so Mrs. Caldecot was frightfully amused. Indeed, she was sorry to have to leave a little before three, to go to a committee of the Society for the Training of Domestic Servants in the Principles of the Christian Religion. She did not know why she belonged to this thing, but she had been persuaded on to the committee by an earnest aristocrat with a face like a mule, who managed to make a new black gown look rusty on the first day, and wore white frills round her neck and wrists, together with a gold chain decorated with emeralds. Mrs. Caldecot had resisted for some

time, until she realized that the patrons wanted her to give to the committee the touch of the flesh and the devil which might induce domestic servants to come and be trained. This was rather flattering, and so Mrs. Caldecot listened once a month to the chairwoman's speeches. She examined the proofs of an appeal for funds, from which she removed the split infinitives, for Rodbourne had taught her to dislike them. She arranged to attend a drawing-room meeting destined to promote the mixing of classes, of course on a footing of purely religious equality. She could not help being amused by two letters from grateful domestics, who had been assisted by the Society into the house of a bishop. The bishop was very pleased. Indeed, the only complaint was an indirect report submitted to the committee by a Mrs. Sutton, who said that the cook had complained to her that the bishop's wife had changed her name from Eve to Mary, saying that the name of Eve was not suitable to the peculiar circumstances for which, after all, she wasn't responsible, but everyone was down on a poor girl, and if everything was known . . .

At this moment the chairwoman stopped Mrs. Sutton, saying that her statement was irrelevant, and Mrs. Caldecot laughed very loud, to the horror of part of the committee, and to the delight of the more regrettable element which unaccountably existed in this body. It was only by degrees that Mrs. Caldecot grew bored, when the chairwoman

began to read aloud literature designed for the Devout and Lowly; she felt rather sorry for the lowly unless they were very devout, though the Society did give five-pound prizes for perfection. So at last she was glad to get up and to plead an at-home which she must attend; she left the committee, followed speedily by the regrettable element, who obviously had to go to the same at-home, but all the same dispersed on the doorstep.

"I wonder why I go to these things," thought Mrs. Caldecot. It had been such an at-homey at-home, so exactly like those she'd been to before, the same people, the same young men with the large feet to pin you in a doorway, and the same refreshments. She remembered a story in one of Thackeray's books about a trifle made in the shape of an elephant, which a certain man met at every party throughout the season. Growing tired of the thing, he attempted, in spite of the footman, to destroy it with a spoon, and found that it had the spurious sponginess of rubber. Well, one had to do these things, and one got something out of it, she supposed. A new way to knot one's sash, or some evil communication. Also, one saw and was seen; one made up a sort of mutual cinema.

She got home at six, and for half an hour did find gravity, for that day she had collected some letters from various organizations in Bob's constituency. She'd felt awkward about that; but she had become so well-known over there in the last

eight years; the cricket club, the blanket fund had received subscriptions from her for so long; and the secretary of the local association was actually wanting her to get at Bob to make him put a question in the House about the rise in the Basing Canal dues. She sighed as she read the letter:

". . . I'm awfully sorry to bother you, especially as Mr. Rodbourne has already said he doesn't want to raise the point, but I thought that if you were to put it to him in another way he might change his mind. The position is this . . ."

She sighed again; all that was a very long way off. They still thought she counted; they couldn't have known how things were between her and Bob, or they wouldn't have stood it, but they did look to her. Well, she mustn't give him away. She signed the checks, told the secretary that she feared nothing would alter Mr. Rodbourne's point of view. All this worried her a little, for she wondered what Bob would say if he found out. Perhaps he'd understand, but even if he didn't she couldn't help clinging to what she still could get. She was relieved when it was done, relieved to have to hurry over dressing. Well, there was nothing for it except to make herself look nice, for, at twenty past seven Stephen Britford arrived to take her to dinner with some friends of his, the Newton-Lindsays. A restaurant, another band. Oh, dear!

Somehow she enjoyed her evenings, and once she felt a little ashamed of that; it wasn't right that she

should enjoy herself, not quite. But the couple were rather nice, both under thirty, both very good-looking, and the woman, who was American, amused Mrs. Caldecot all through dinner by "passing her the buck," and finally "beating it." Mrs. Caldecot was innocent enough to think that this was the lady's natural language; she did not know that Mrs. Newton-Lindsay, who was a Virginian, was playing a huge joke on London, collecting American slang she'd never heard before in her very cultured home, and that she entertained the barbarous English with it, making fun of them all the time. The dinner was rather hurried at the end, for they had to get to the theater at a quarter to nine, to see one of those wonderful modern French plays which work like a model dynamo, where everything fits in, where the incidents of the fourth act are traced to the first; where A loved B and can't say so, because C knew D's heart would be broken, and where at the intrusion of D, A fails to get D or whatever it is, where the mosaic of the plot is perfect, and where half-way through not a member of the audience cares a hang what happens to anybody. When it was over, even then Mrs. Caldecot did not go to bed, for at the theater they had met the Millbrooks, who hated going to bed, and who insisted upon taking them all four to a supper and dance club. It was there that Mrs. Caldecot took closer notice of Newton-Lindsay. He looked about twenty-seven, and he had helped her into the

car in such a lingering way. Britford too kept fixed upon her the cold ardor of his eyes, while Humphrey Millbrook seemed also to think her presentable. So Mrs. Caldecot enjoyed her supper, the heat, the noise, the dazzling fact of the crowded couples, touches of black and scarlet, emerald, white and gold, that passed like a patchwork moving carpet by the table where they sat. She had not danced since the winter, but now she was persuaded by Newton-Lindsay, who certainly had had much too much to drink, and was determined, as he whispered to her later, to make this into a red, red night. It wasn't such a very red night really, thought Mrs. Caldecot, for in London red nights always take place in the dark, but she let herself go, and for an hour she danced every dance, getting rather hot, and felt untidy, like a girl who is enjoying herself. She had only one dance with Britford and one with Millbrook; Newton-Lindsay, when his turn came, refused to let her go. He amused her; after all he was only twenty-seven; she admired him for being so very drunk and yet maintaining the most beautiful manners. It was only at the end, when he tried publicly to teach her a step he called the "corkscrew," that she realized that anything to do with a corkscrew was the one thing the boy should avoid that night. She determined to rescue her dignity, and broke up the party. But in the car, on the way home, where the six packed themselves in a state of great contiguity and friendliness, an accident

happened; the light would not work. So they sat in almost complete darkness, for Piccadilly was up, and the chauffeur had to find his way south of Green Park toward Belgravia. Everybody was chattering, and Newton-Lindsay's high voice dominated the other. He seemed so excited that Mrs. Caldecot started when she suddenly felt his hand close over hers. It seemed so ridiculous that for a moment she did not struggle, but as his fingers interlocked into hers she had a moment of revolt. It was not only absurd, it was indecent. As she struggled she thought: "Oh, what a fool you are! He's very nice; he likes you; and it isn't as if you were an immoral woman. Oh, why aren't you easy? Why aren't you one of those women who'll let men pick them up in a restaurant? They find life simple. Don't be a moral woman. If you can't be loved, be amused." But Mrs. Caldecot was a moral woman, and whatever the past might mark up against her, whatever the future might reserve, she couldn't help being a moral woman. So she went on struggling, and even viciously tried to hurt him with her rings. If at last she gave in, it was because she was too tired, and because to let her hand lie limp in his enabled her to think of something else.

So she lay in her bed, reviewing this long day, this silly day, this jolly day, and thought that all the glamour was accident, that this was a very normal day, like the others, the days of other people. She hadn't done anything worth doing, anything she

wanted to do, but if she hadn't done those things, she'd have done others that didn't matter much either. There was only one thing she wanted, had ever wanted; she'd lost it, and it wouldn't come again. So she was taking dope; all this feverishness, this movement, it was dope. Newton-Lindsay's hand upon hers, she supposed that was part of the dope. Perhaps one needed dope to live, dope like other people, dope to get through these jolly days, these silly days.

CHAPTER IX

DISCORD

MRS. CALDECOT drew back from her desk, read a letter over again, then put it down hurriedly, as if it troubled her. For a moment she bent over the desk with an air of weariness which that night accorded ill with her appearance. She wore a sheath of very dark blue satin, embroidered from the lower hem upward with tall stalks of golden corn that glowed through an overlay of lighter blue ninon. There was on her massive shoulders a sheen as on old ivory. She looked so powerful and established that it was incongruous to behold her in this attitude of resignation. She must have felt the unworthiness of this abandonment, for after a moment she busied herself, took up an account rendered, checked it from a little pile of bills, wrote two checks; only when this business was done did she once more look at the letter.

It worried her. Oh, it was not the first time she had had a letter from Stephen Britford, nor was it his first love letter. But it was hardly like Stephen to compose a sentence such as this: ". . . you know I love you, and what's the good of my telling

it again unless it amuses you to hurt me. Well, hurt me if you like. I've wanted you all my life, and you've played with me. I'll get you, I tell you that, by hook or by crook I will. Oh, my darling . . ."

This was not Stephen's usual phraseology. He was rather inclined toward an 1830 style; he chose to tell her that "she had long been aware of the regard he felt for her." But this sort of thing, this fierce wooing, it was not Stephen, and it was wrong that it should be Stephen. It looked as if she had exasperated him, and though she was woman enough to enjoy his exasperation, all the same he frightened her, because she did not know him, because she could not tell what fires slumbered under his apparent coldness, because indeed she feared that his ardor might have been enhanced by long restraint. She asked herself once more: "Why not?" She stimulated herself with: "I'm very fond of him, and it'd make him so happy." But she knew she couldn't; she knew herself for a rigid woman. She said, half-aloud. "I'm a pattern of propriety, even though the scissors did slip once." She smiled at herself. No, she couldn't do it; it wouldn't be decent, and it wouldn't be fair to dear old Stephen, to go to him like that, without caring for him really, feeling unworthy, and always tainting his satisfaction with a sort of remorse. She'd be murdering her own self-respect, and this she couldn't forgive Stephen, so she'd make him suffer. She wouldn't be the Claire

he'd loved, but an old, embittered, disillusioned Claire, a poor thing to cast into his arms which had been held out to her when she was simple and radiant. She'd give him reality, poor, flat reality, after his long and lovely dream. No, she didn't love him, but she loved him too well to love him falsely.

All the same, he troubled her, and she had the instinct of the nice woman to try to cool his fervor; she was not the sort of woman who rejoiced in the appeals of men, who likes to encourage them so that she may deny them; she was not of those who find more pleasure in being desired than in according favors. She was simple, and her special sense of honor told her that it was wrong to let a man want her when she didn't want him, that he was paying her after all a great compliment, and that she had no right to inflict upon him the humiliation of seeing it rejected. No, she mustn't see him. She wouldn't accept his invitation for the next day. She'd better write. Then she reflected that Maud had taken down her letters five minutes before, and that she did not dare to send her out again. She'd better telephone. So she switched on the connection of her desk instrument. Stephen was out, but his valet took a message: Mrs. Caldecot was very sorry but could not lunch with Mr. Britford, as she was going out of town next morning for the weekend.

When that was done Mrs. Caldecot leaned back in her chair, feeling rather desolate and cut off. She'd done it, she'd been right to do it, but Stephen

would not be deceived, would be driven only to greater passion, to further extraordinary threats. Well, she couldn't help it, but she felt lonely. In the end she'd lose him; she didn't want him, but she wanted to keep him. And for some time she meditated upon her own weakness. It was then that Mrs. Caldecot heard a sound which caused her to turn around suddenly, just in time to see one of the folding doors of the ell open to admit into the drawing-room a man in evening clothes. A scream stopped half-way in her throat as she thought of burglars. Then she found her knees trembling, and her breath coming fast as she recognized the figure that stood before her, holding the door handle in a calm grasp. He was a man growing elderly, of medium height. Rather sparse brown hair, abundantly streaked with gray, produced the illusion of an elevated brow. Two hard brown eyes, underhung by pockets of dry skin, looked upon her with the unblinking stare of certain reptiles. The fine, disdainful nose, the sunken, compressed, clean-shaven mouth framed by two deep folds, the chin made prominent by the drawn skin that looked harsh, all this contributed to make an effect of intensity and ugly determination.

He considered her for a moment, unsmiling, as if taking dispassionate note of her appearance and surroundings. As without haste he closed the door of the ell, she noticed with surprising irrelevancy that he was extraordinarily smart. Excellent eve-

ning clothes, nice silk-faced coat, and silver-topped ebony stick. That was the one definite idea which whirled in her brain, like a cork in the middle of swirling water. Now he put down his things, sat down in an armchair; he was looking at her with an air of irony, looking at her as if he analyzed and evaluated her. This perfect self-possession, instead of disturbing her more, forced her into activity. In a whisper that was suddenly hoarse, she said:

"Geoff!"

"Yes," said the man.

"You!" said Mrs. Caldecot, distractedly pushing back her chair.

"Yes, I. Geoffrey Caldecot. What about it, Claire?"

"But what? . . ." said Mrs. Caldecot, "after all these years? . . ."

"After all these years, Clarrie, as you say. It does me good to see the old place again, to say nothing of the old girl. Well now, say you're pleased, instead of looking as surprised as a cod that's been a week on the fishmonger's slab."

"Well!" said Mrs. Caldecot, who found her self-possession returning, "I'm rather surprised."

"Why, my dear Clarrie?" said Caldecot, as he leaned forward, playing with his monocle cord until the glass fell out of his eye. "Oh, damn this thing. It's always falling out. Well, I've worn it for thirty years. What were we talking about? Oh, yes, you were surprised. I'm sure I don't know why. Re-

grettable misunderstandings caused the course of true love to run awry. Might happen to anybody. Happens to lots of people, doesn't it? Still, I don't see why you should get such a shock because your loving husband returns from abroad."

"What do you want?" said Mrs. Caldecot, as her faculties returned and she made ready for some sort of struggle.

"What do I want, my dear? Oh, how can you ask? How can you turn such a bitter face to Darby after long years returning to his Joan, and only waiting for the fatted calf. I'm afraid that's mixed mythology, Clarrie, but you won't mind, will you? I've come back out of natural affection, of course."

"What do you want?"

"You've become very blunt, my dear. I want to have a chat with you. I've had the devil of a long wait, too. Seems to me you dawdle over your dinner longer than in the old days, eh? Well, as middle age creeps upon us I suppose we get greedy. Been waiting for you for an hour. Nearly burst in ten minutes ago, but you were telephoning, and I thought I'd better keep out. Tact, my dear, you know, tact." Then, as if her husband were deliberately trying to provoke her into an unguarded interruption, he went on chatting of the inefficiency of the telephone service. She did not listen, but as he spoke she could not help noting the degradation of the handsome features; as she observed the dry, wrinkled skin, the air of premature decay,

she couldn't help a half-unconscious spasm of pity; the dashing, the handsome Geoffrey, to have turned into this disreputably smart, dangerous-looking creature! It was tragic.

As he grew conscious of her gaze he became arch. "Well, my dear, I haven't come back to talk to you about the telephone, especially as your ruby lips are not contributing to the debate. There isn't much welcome in this house for a stray lamb, is there? Well, well, I don't want to be hard on you. Would you like to stand me a drink?"

"How did you get in?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, suddenly preoccupied with this trifle.

"Oh, Clarrie, how little you know me! How you misunderstand me! You always have, and as they used to say at the Lyceum, unless it was somewhere else, you cannot shake off your share of guilt. I got in with my latchkey."

"Your latchkey?"

"Why, of course. All these years, my dear Clarrie, I've kept my latchkey. Just a little latchkey to remind me of you. Ah! I always was a sentimental cuss. It has never left me. Before the rolling ball at Monte Carlo I've fondled it so that it might bring me luck. It didn't. In more emotional moods, in America, I've sat before my lonely radiator, holding in my hand this token of the past and dreaming of days gone by. Just a little latchkey, Clarrie, I shall write a poem about it one day."

"What do you want?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, in a

suddenly high voice. He was maddening her. She felt that this drivel had a significance, that he used it only as a sort of prelude, that he was playing with her as a cat with a mouse, that he was enjoying himself like a vicious schoolboy that has played a trick. "What do you want?" she said again. "Good heavens! don't I know you! Don't I? . . . For heaven's sake, don't make me rude."

"There's no reason why you should be rude, my dear. All I want is to have a few words with my wife. Well now, aren't you pleased? Weren't you very sorry when I was unavoidably detained abroad thirteen years ago? I was unavoidably detained. She wouldn't let me go. But you always inhabited my dreams, and so I felt I wanted one of our dear old chats."

"Look her, Geoffrey, you're being silly."

"That's better," said Caldecot, laughing for the first time.

"It isn't any better. Only you're being silly on purpose to annoy me, to hide something else. Don't I know you?"

"If you did, then you would realize that I have an affectionate nature. Your only complaint could be that this nature was too generous. All that I have come to say is just this: I am very fond of you."

"Do you know," said Mrs. Caldecot, after a pause, "I can almost believe you have the . . . the impertinence to mean it. You might very well be conceited enough to think that I'd have affection

for you after three years of hell with you, three years during which I had to see you drunk, drunk in my presence, drunk before my friends. Oh, if it was only that, I suppose I'd have stuck it, but you think I'm going to . . . oh, it's ridiculous. You made me a joke among my friends, you who could never let a woman alone if she was under eighty. Don't you think I know you? Don't you think I don't know that the servants weren't safe from you? Even on our honeymoon. . . . Don't make me talk of these things. It's been hell. And hell again for all those years, when I was a woman who'd been deserted, not wanted, a failure, an object for pity, scrapped by a drunkard and an adulterer."

"Clarrie," said Caldecot, as he slowly lit a cigarette, "you've increased your vocabulary since my day. Well, I'll be fair and square with you: I'm quite willing to overlook the past. At least, it's in your hands to make me pleasant. I don't want to make a fuss, dear me, no. Only you're rather rude, rather hysterical, I suppose. Natural enough under the stress of reunion, and I won't say another word about it."

As he paused, she realized that she was right, that something deliberate emanated from his speech. "Oh," she said, "I see. This interview so far is not very agreeable, Geoffrey."

"Don't call me Geoffrey," said Caldecot, protesting. "It sounds so cold. Call me Geoff, and let everything be rapture and roses."

"What do you want?" cried Mrs. Caldecot again, and this time stamped upon the floor.

"All right," said Caldecot, "I'll tell you. It's a little difficult to explain. The natural delicacy which is so strong in me holds me back, but the fact is that while the years rolled by, even though I was abroad, I never forgot you, Clarrie, and I kept upon you an eye, oh, in the cause of conjugal tenderness, of course, but still . . . an eye."

"An eye!" repeated Mrs. Caldecot. As she spoke, her first bewilderment passed away, and her heart began to beat faster. She was frightfully afraid, and she did not know of what, but just of the idea that this man, who had made such ruin of her life, had not left her when he deserted her, that still he had hung about her life an evil spirit.

"Why, yes, of course, my dear," replied Caldecot, blandly. "Did you really think that because pressing circumstances called me abroad, I should lose all interest in one so near and so dear? Why, I remember on our honeymoon in Venice. . . . Oh, but what's the use of talking of that! Well, well, time goes on. Ah, me!"

"Geoffrey," said Mrs. Caldecot, in a surprisingly even voice, which showed that already she had collected her strength, preparing to fight, "say what you mean."

"Anything to please you. As I was saying, I always liked to know what you were doing. I was

so sorry to think that you might be lonely . . . though I had an idea that wouldn't last long."

"How dare you!"

"I dare because I know. Now, now, don't blush, even if you have been naughty. And don't look so tragic and clench your fists at me. Bless me, I don't blame you. Indeed, I was quite interested when a little bird told me that you were lunching and dining out, and . . . the little bird even twittered something about weekending out, and always in the same company."

"I suppose you thought," said Mrs. Caldecot, choosing aggression as her method of defense, "that after you'd gone I was going to avoid the society of my friends, that I'd sit and mourn you."

"No, I don't think you'd do that. At least, no longer than was decent. I gather you mourned me for five years, old dear, and really I think it awfully sweet of you. So I wasn't surprised when I was told that you and Mr. Rodbourne, M. P. for East Farnshire . . ."

"Please leave him out."

"Afraid you didn't give me the example. Can't be done. Can't leave Bobbie out. It's too late for both of us." Mrs. Caldecot looked away. What was horrible in this was not so much the covert threat, the presence so near her of the intolerable; the horror was that Caldecot should be able to lay upon a memory so lovely and so dear hands that defiled it. She dared say nothing. Any reply might strengthen

him by admission. Fortunately he needed no reply. "But if you think I'm going to reproach you, set your mind at rest, my dear. Did I ever refuse you anything if I had it? Or if I could get it out of anybody else who had it? Never. I don't want to disturb you. It would be a terrible thing for me to disturb two lovers, especially if they made it worth my while to let them alone." He paused. "You don't seem to understand, Clarrie. I don't want to do you any harm. I don't mind Bobbie. Charming fellow, I expect. I've the warmest feeling for him, he being a member of the same dynasty, in a manner of speaking. Only I'm rather hard up, and since you seem in a mood to want plain speaking, all I've got to say is, if you'll let me have a couple of thousand, I'll go off and spend it. Then we'll say no more about it; you'll have no more trouble, and you can indulge in your grand passion on the q-t."

It was his brutal tone that drove Mrs. Caldecot to denials. She would have given way before a simple assertion, but he enraged her.

"How dare you insult me!" she replied. "It's true you always dared to do that, from the very beginning. You always thought, I suppose, I was the same sort of woman as you are a man. Well, I don't care what lies your pothouse friends have been telling you."

"Wonderful vocabulary!"

"I don't care what lies you're trying to blackmail me with. You can't do it because it isn't true. Yes, I know Mr. Rodbourne. He's a great friend of mine.

He's been the one good friend I had, all those years after you deserted me. My friend, do you hear? and nothing more. I'm not the sort of woman . . . Good Heavens, don't you know it? I'm not a light woman. Yet you come here and treat me like the . . . low creatures of your acquaintance."

For a moment Caldecot believed her. He did not realize that the violence of her denials had nothing to do with outraged innocence, but only with outraged romance. He wondered if he had been misinformed. After all, people always assumed these things, and certainly poor old Claire had always suggested to him a capital imitation of cold storage. Then he remembered the object of his visit, and he countered: "Well, perhaps you didn't, you dear old icicle, but I want my couple of thousand all the same. Simply got to have 'em. There's a lady in the case, and she's dashed expensive."

"Why don't you go and live on her immoral earnings?"

"I can get more out of you and quicker."

"How?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, so frightened of him that her voice grew less assured.

"It's quite simple. I'm quite willing to believe that your relations with Bobbie are the pink of propriety. I shouldn't wonder. There are women like that. But it doesn't bother me a bit. Indeed, the more respectable you are the worse it is for you, old dear."

"I don't understand."

"No? Don't you see that if you were the darling of the night clubs and were advertised every now and then in "What We Want To Know," you wouldn't have any bother. I couldn't do you any more harm than you could do me. But you've got something to lose, and that's the reputation on which you've wasted such a lot of good time keeping up." His voice grew harsh and his eyes more fixed than before as he murmured, "What's going to happen to you if I serve you and Bobbie with a writ of divorce?"

Mrs. Caldecot laughed. At that moment he admired her. He'd seen many a woman in the corner, lying, bullying, but he hadn't heard them laugh on a glad, ringing note, as if their gallantry welcomed battle.

"My dear Geoffrey," she said, in contemptuous tones, "don't be so ridiculous. You know quite well you've got no case."

"That wouldn't prevent me bringing one," said Caldecot, politely.

"Well, you'd lose it, and pay all the costs."

"How well informed you are, my dear. Can it be there is a second corespondent to be found in the Temple? But I shan't bother about him. Bobbie is enough, and as for losing my case, don't you worry. I don't mind losing my case, I don't mind piling up costs; I shan't pay 'em. Since I couldn't pay, my creditors a shilling in the pound, it won't matter much whether I reduce their dividend to ninepence. Come on, Clarrie, don't be a fool; pay up."

The mood of gallantry still subsided. Besides, she was beginning to find it incredible and burlesque that she should be blackmailed. That happened only on the stage. Mrs. Caldecot replied: "Do you really think I'm going to submit to being bled by you? I'll fight the case, fight it to the end."

"You're welcome. So you'll make all the row round your name and Bobbie's without any help from me?"

It was then that weakness came over Mrs. Caldecot. "Two thousand pounds!" she said. "That won't leave me much."

"Oh, yes, it will, my dear. Surely you don't think I want to drive you to the workhouse? Let me see. You used to have seven hundred and forty-five pounds a year out of your marriage settlement. It's a bit less now, income tax having gone up, but that's something."

"You know quite well I can't touch it."

"Of course I know, or I'd have touched it long ago. But there's the unsettled residue of your Aunt Josephine's estate, which in my time was comfortably invested in London North Western shares, Metropolitan Four's and . . . oh, bother, I left the list at home. Still, it worked out at about three thousand; even now it's worth more than two. Unless you've handed it all over to Bobbie."

At this insult Mrs. Caldecot ran to her desk. There was now in her no financial prudence. With trembling hands she struggled with her case, rummag-

ing among bundles, old checks, and disused account-books, until at last she found her passbook and a large envelope bearing a solicitor's imprint. "There," she said, as she threw them on the ground at his feet, "pick it up and look for yourself."

She watched him with clasped hands while he went through the passbook, noting the dividends. Now she felt amazingly cool. She was beaten, yes, and she was going to be blackmailed. Never mind! Anything to make an end of this. Finally he looked up.

"Well, Clarrie, I can't say exactly what this is worth unless you happen to have the evening paper so that I can look up the quotations. Still, my word's my word. I said two thousand pounds; I'll let you off at that, and it's cheap."

She hesitated, for she hated to think of her money in this man's hands. "It won't leave me much," she said.

"Oh, yes, it will. Leave you the income of your marriage settlement. As for the rest, why don't you give me the lot and make an end of it? Then unless of course you want me to, I'll never come round again. There won't be any points in my doing so when I've got all I can get out of you. Think of it! No more rows, and perfect happiness with Bobbie."

This repetition of the name enraged Mrs. Caldecot. "I haven't said I'd pay," she replied, breathlessly, "and I won't."

"Won't you?" said Caldecot, suavely. "Would

you really let your old husband go without the oysters and champagne which are essential to his decrepit existence? What a shame! I'll have to give you up . . . and ask Bobbie."

"You wouldn't? . . ."

"Of course I would. Why not. He'd be pleased to do something for you. If I were in his shoes I would. If I were a member of Parliament I wouldn't fancy a little divorce case. I should know my constituents wouldn't like it. Bobbie'll pay, don't you worry; in fact, I'll look him up and see if I can't get a bit more than the beggarly two thousand you're good for."

As he spoke Mrs. Caldecot made to herself an awful picture: Bob in his study, picking out a speech from among the dear, familiar litter of dusty bluebooks, scrawled notes on envelopes . . . and even letters of her own. No, she couldn't bear it. That they should meet, this beast of prey and her beloved, it was impossible. Oh, she knew Bob'd face him all right, beat him perhaps, gaol him as he ought to be gaoled, but the idea of their contact repelled her. The thought was to her so abominable that suddenly her defenses gave way, and, to his amazement, Caldecot saw his wife fall on her knees before him, clasp her hands in prayer, and with distorted face, with dry eyes, confess.

"Yes, it's true. Yes, I do love him, and he loves me. He did love me. Oh, my God, Geoffrey, don't look at me like that. Yes, it's true, I own up. I

know I oughtn't to have done it. I know it was wrong, but I was so wretched, I was so lonely, and you'd left me. Oh, I'm not blaming you now; I suppose I was cold, and I should have learned how to put up with you. I ought to have understood that you weren't any more perfect than I am, I suppose. But I couldn't help it. He did love me so. At first I used to lie awake at night, crying; I felt so dreadful. When I was a girl, if I'd thought I'd do a thing like that . . . I'd have drowned myself. But I couldn't help it, I couldn't. Oh, I've done wrong, I know it, but don't be hard on me."

"I don't want to be hard on you," replied Caldecot, surveying her with an interested air. "You only have to pay up, and then you can do as you like."

Mrs. Caldecot was still on her knees, but at this speech the blood rushed to her head.

"So that's all you've got to say," she replied, clenching her teeth. "Still, since you're here, I'm glad you know that I've loved another man. I'm glad you know that you didn't spoil my life as you'd like to have done, that you didn't take all my pride away, do you hear me? I'm glad. Oh, what nonsense I've been talking about doing wrong. I did right, and I don't care if all the world knows it. Yes, I did right." She looked beyond him with glowing eyes. "Oh, it was splendid, it was the only true thing, the only decent thing I've ever done, and if I had to live again, with all the misery I'm going through now, all the misery of the lonely years, all

the hell of my life with you, I'd do it again, I'd have it all over again, just to feel that I could have the pluck once more to do the right thing by myself. Go on, blackmail me if you like, I'll not say I was doing wrong."

"I don't want you to, darling. I never set up as a judge of morals. I only want you to pay up." He grew impatient. "Come on, get off your knees. The attitude doesn't suit you. Get up, damn you, I'm not going to waste the night over this." She rose, not so much obeying as revolting against her own posture. "Are you going to pay up?" She did not reply. "I give you five minutes. If I get any more nonsense from you, I'm going to Bobbie first thing to-morrow morning. And if he doesn't pay up you'll have a writ by the end of the week. Do you hear? A writ. Both of you, and I'll see it gets into the papers before the case comes on."

It was then that a new complication occurred to Mrs. Caldecot. She realized that if this could not be stopped, if Rodbourne, like herself, refused to be bled, the publicity which would immediately collect round his name because he was a member of Parliament would reach Patricia. That would be the end. Bob would not only lose his seat, but he'd lose Patricia, lose the girl for whom in a way she'd sacrificed herself. She opened her mouth to say: "I'll pay," but her gallantry stopped her. She didn't know why, she merely felt that she couldn't give in. She must try again.

"Geoffrey," she said, "don't do that. There's something else. It's true about Bob and me, yes—that is to say, it was. But I haven't seen him for some months. He's going to be married."

"Oh, ho! So he's given you the chuck."

"He's going to be married," replied Mrs. Caldecot, trying to forget Geoffrey's reply. "And she's such a sweet girl. They love each other, just as they ought, and they're going to be so frightfully happy. Oh, Geoff, don't do it; she's so young, only twenty. For God's sake, Geoffrey, don't do it; Bob's trying to make a fresh start, and she, it'll kill her. You've smashed my life, never mind that, but don't smash theirs. Don't get in the way of the little happiness they can hope for."

"What about my happiness?" said Caldecot. "Don't I count? And my idea of happiness is two thousand quid. Come on, pay up, and look pleasant. If you don't . . . Why, Clarrie, you give me an idea. Now I've got the bulge on Bobbie. Perhaps he'd be glad to get out of Parliament, and he wouldn't worry about your reputation since he's given you the chuck. But now there's a girl in the case. Oh, ho! perhaps I shan't let him off so cheap."

"Geoffrey, I beg you."

"And wait a minute, you give me another idea, you human wonder. Look here, I'll make you a proposition: you give me this two thousand pounds that we were talking about. But that's not the end

of it. To-morrow morning I'll go round to Bobbie, and I'll say to him: You pay up another two thousand; if not you'll be a co-respondent. Then, my dear Clarrie, believe me I'm thinking only of your interests, he'll squirm a bit. If he pays all's well; if he doesn't pay, I serve him with a writ. Then watch the Sunday newspapers. The girl gets to hear of it. She drops him and you get him back. Don't you see, Clarrie, I can do you a jolly good turn. I can get him back for you."

Mrs. Caldecot could not reply for a moment. Even from Geoffrey she had not expected such baseness. She did not believe that there was a husband capable of blackmailing a lover into returning to his own wife. But the peril of Patricia was oppressing her. "I don't want your intervention," she said. "You know nothing about it. You wouldn't understand, I suppose, if I told you that I want this marriage, that I want their happiness more than anything in the world, that I couldn't bear that anything should come between them."

"Oh," said Caldecot, "then I'm on velvet again. If you don't pay up, I do come between them. Now there's been enough argument. It's a quarter past ten. And I've a little friend waiting for me. Sit down and write me a check for two thousand pounds. Also, write a letter to your bank asking them to sell your securities and to honor this check, pending sale. Come on, hurry up. I don't give you five minutes now. I give you one. If you don't,

I go round to my solicitors to-morrow and do you in, and do Bobbie in, and do the marriage in. And do not for a moment allow yourself to think I'm joking."

It was then, as Mrs. Caldecot stood before him, irresolute and not quite beaten, that the drawing-room door opened to admit Maud, without cap or apron. For a moment the maid stared at the man, not understanding how he got into the house, and wondering whether her mistress had let him in. Then she said:

"Please, Ma'am, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"No, Maud," said Mrs. Caldecot, in an irritated voice, "not now. What is it?"

"If you please, Ma'am, Miss Neale is downstairs. She says she must see you."

"Patricia!"

CHAPTER X

TWO WOMEN

"WHO?" said Mrs. Caldecot.

"Miss Neale, Ma'am."

"But . . . at this time?" What did you say?"

"I said that you'd gone to bed, Ma'am. At least I thought so, but I'd go and see."

"Oh, why didn't you say I was out? This is absurd. Tell her I'm out, Maud. Oh, what does she want?"

"Very well, Ma'am. But as the drawing-room windows are open I knew she would see the light, Ma'am."

"Oh, this is intolerable," said Mrs. Caldecot, wringing her handkerchief. "Tell her I'm ill."

As soon as the door closed behind Maud, Caldecot said: "Well, you've had more than your time, so come along. Go to the desk."

Mrs. Caldecot was not looking at him. She stood twisting and untwisting her handkerchief, seemed distracted. "Oh, what can she want?" she said. "At this time of night! Something's happened."

"You'll find out what's happened by and bye," said Caldecot. "Hurry up; I can't stay here all night."

"Oh, Geoffrey, do let me alone," said Mrs. Caldecot, rubbing the handkerchief over her hot hands. "I can't think. Oh, do let me alone. Give me a day, just one day. You shall have what you want, but do . . . What's that?"

"Seems to be a fuss on the stairs," remarked Caldecot.

"Listen!" cried Mrs. Caldecot. They could hear the sounds of an altercation. A high voice cried: "I must." Then Maud's voice: "But Miss . . .! really Miss! . . . she's ill I tell you."

"Good heavens!" said Mrs. Caldecot. "She's forcing her way in. Geoffrey, she mustn't find you here."

"And why not?" said Caldecot, while a broad smile creased his thin mouth. "Am I not your long-lost but happily restored husband?" He took out a cigarette with an air of negligence. "Don't do your friend out of this pathetic scene of domestic reconciliation."

"Oh, you don't understand," said Mrs. Caldecot, desperately. "She thinks I'm a widow. Most people think I'm a widow, and if people know you've come back the scandal's going to start all over again. Oh, what shall I do? She's coming!" Indeed, they heard Patricia say in a quiet, determined voice: "It's no use your trying to stop me. I'm going to see her." "Geoffrey, I can't bear it. You mustn't see her. I can't have it begin all over again. All the talk. You shall have what you want, anything

you want. Only . . . Oh, where? Geoff, in here." She ran to the folding doors. "Hide in the ell."

"Two thousand quid," said Caldecot, calmly. "Hurry up or I'll add a bit on."

"All right, I agree. Only hide in here."

"Word of honor?"

"Yes." Mrs. Caldecot closed the doors upon the intruder just as Maud and Patricia together irrupted into the drawing-room, both flushed, the girl with a face set like a little white mask, the maid indignant and almost tearful.

Mrs. Caldecot, in the few seconds of grace, had found time to collect energy, to make ready with a pitying heart, but with calm features, to receive an assault the cause of which she did not know, an assault of some sort, for which she was making ready with a sort of cold courage.

"Ma'am!" cried Maud, "it isn't my fault, Ma'am. I'm very sorry, only Miss Neale . . ."

"That will do, Maud," said Mrs. Caldecot, gently, and even managing to throw her a little smile. "Leave us. It's all a misunderstanding."

After the door closed, Patricia did not at once come further into the room. She stood with hands clasped upon her breast, erect and rather defiant. They made a contrast those two, the big woman in blue satin and gold, massive and powerful, with quiet, gray eyes and thick lips well-set; the girl, absurdly small in her combative pose, white and pitiful in her little dance frock of champagne

georgette, that was cut much too low in front and exposed unduly her fragile shape, as if in London at last she had decided to exceed. Falling away from her shoulders was her cloak of black velvet edged with swansdown; even then Mrs. Caldecot was still woman enough to realize that Patricia was wearing her winter cloak. They were looking into each other's eyes, already inimical, but hesitating like two wrestlers seeking a grip. Both knew that even now all might be explained and covered up, if only nothing decisive were said; both were afraid of the first word, that would create a situation which must affect them deeply. So strong was this feeling that it was Mrs. Caldecot who attacked. And she attacked in a light, feminine way, of which the younger girl, would, in her experience, have been incapable.

"I see you've come round between two dances. Was it a dull dance?"

Patricia stared at her. She hadn't expected to begin like this, so was led away. "Dance? O, yes, of course. I just got away for a moment. I had to see you."

As the girl stopped, Mrs. Caldecot found a little pity mixing with her anxiety. Then she resented this emotion, and her words grew cold. "Indeed? I suppose you can explain this violent intrusion? I think my maid told you that I couldn't see you. But you seem to have insisted."

"Oh, Mrs. Caldecot," said Patricia, her anger

and her plan disturbed by this attack upon her manners, "I beg your pardon, I know I oughtn't to have done it, only something's happened. You see, ten days ago Bob was thrown from his horse . . ."

"What?" cried Mrs. Caldecot, coming toward her. "Is he hurt?" She felt no enmity now, only immense fear.

"No," said Patricia, "not exactly, not badly; he's going to be all right. I thought you knew." Her voice became savage. "I thought of course you knew."

"Is he out of danger?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, as if she did not understand the imputation, as if her only care were the well-being of the man for whom those two were fighting.

"Yes," said Patricia with an effort. "There's nothing to fear now. Only you see . . . Mr. Sutton let him try a new horse . . . oh, never mind those details. He fell on his head. He might have been killed."

"Go on," said Mrs. Caldecot, tensely.

"It was ten days ago, and I've been with him night and day. He was delirious for two days."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, as the girl stopped, seeming unable to speak. "Go on, go on, what's the matter?"

"He called for you all the time," murmured Patricia. Then, in a stronger tone. "Yes, he called only for you. I couldn't bear it. All the time he was saying 'Claire, where's Claire.' Oh, I can't

bear it." Her voice suddenly rose to a shriek. "He put his arms round my neck and called *me* Claire. Oh, don't stand looking at me like that. Haven't you done me enough harm? Why don't you own up, Mrs. Caldecot? It's been you he loves. You know it quite well. Don't stare at me. You know it's you he loves, not me."

Mrs. Caldecot felt herself drawing up her shoulders, a faint warmth of pleasure in the contest came into her blood. Raising her eyebrows, she replied, "Nonsense!"

The denial seemed to infuriate Patricia. "Oh, it's all very well your saying 'nonsense.' Of course you would. Of course you'd deny it. You deny the things I can see, things that everybody knows. Now I understand all those hints."

"Hints!" cried Mrs. Caldecot. "What do you mean? What's all this idle cackle that you've collected to insult me with?"

"Oh, it's not cackle," said Patricia, bitterly. "You know quite well it's true. Why don't you own up and let me make an end of this? People have said things to me . . . about your being great friends. What a fool I was!"

"No, you weren't," said Mrs. Caldecot, quietly. "But you are a fool now. I think you'd better go. Don't imagine I'm going to take unlimited impertinence from a little chit just escaped from school."

"Oh, Mrs. Caldecot," cried Patricia, suddenly, "don't be nasty to me, I can't bear it." The energy

she had collected for this interview seemed suddenly to exhaust itself. With uncertain steps she went to the sofa, and there flung herself, weeping, a crumpled little heap of delicate stuffs. Mrs. Caldecot stood looking at her for a moment, at the curly head buried in a cushion, at a slim foot, gold-shod and stockinged in a silk which clashed with the frock. She was sorry for Patricia, but sorry in a strange, impersonal way, as if the girl were an object for charity, for which one must do something if one can, but without too much emotion. And, she felt helpless, did not know what to do. After a moment Patricia's sobs ceased, as if she had not enough vigor even to weep. She lifted up a little wet face, and said in a white voice:

"Take him back. He never belonged to me. It's breaking my heart, but you can't help it. Take him back, since it's you he loves."

"My poor child," said Mrs. Caldecot, feeling motherly, and laying a hand upon a shoulder that first revolted and then lay quiescent, "you're not yourself to-night; you've taken a silly fancy and it's upset you. Of course you'd misunderstand things."

"What is there to misunderstand?" asked Patricia miserably.

"When you've lived a little longer you'll know what the world is like. It's such a beastly world that it thinks everybody beastly. The world is so incapable of friendship that it cannot believe in

friendship between a man and a woman unless they're ninety. The world's like that, and that's why all this tittle-tattle has arisen to injure your happiness. But it shan't; we won't let it. Take your happiness while you can; you won't often get the chance."

For a moment Patricia seemed convinced. She looked up into the face of the elder woman, as if she sought there a confirmation of her own desire. To be reassured, to feel that everything was all right! But just as Mrs. Caldecot added, "It was only a great friendship," Patricia, looking at her so close, impressed by her beauty of that night, the splendid gray eyes, the beautiful white skin, the splendor of the broad shoulders in their garment of violent blue, could not believe. She knew just enough of men and women to realize that no man could for many years have resisted Mrs. Caldecot, even as she was then. So it infuriated her to feel that plausible argument and experienced lying were going to overwhelm her. She revolted against the charm that was being thrown over her. Shaking off her hand, and jumping up, her face rather near that of her antagonist, she said in a low voice:

"Friendship! How could you be friends with Bob and leave it at that? Oh, this is ridiculous. Of course there's no friendship between men and women. I've known that since I was fifteen, and so have you. So don't stand there trying to make me believe that you haven't deceived me. And Bob's deceived me.

I know all about it. Mother and I had tea at his flat just after we came back to town. There were two pictures of you in the sitting room, and I found another in a sort of locket. Your face, years ago."

"Well," said Mrs. Caldecot, reasonably, "what harm is there in that? Bob's a great friend of mine, and he always will be . . . if you'll let him."

"He's more than your friend. When he was looking for something to show me, he took some letters from a drawer and put them on his desk. They were typewritten, and I couldn't help reading."

"Typewritten love letters from me?" asked Mrs. Caldecot lightly.

"Oh, don't go on denying. I just saw two while he was searching. They were lying there on the desk. There was one from the cricket club asking if you'd arrange their social—as usual."

Mrs. Caldecot did not reply; it was not that this evidence incriminated her, but the memories, the memories of the time when she worked for him, moved her more than those of more emotional moments.

"It isn't only that," Patricia went on. "He wouldn't talk of you. Don't you understand? When I talked about you he changed the conversation. He can't bear it; he's marrying me only because he wants a wife."

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm not absurd," cried Patricia. "I've been

absurd until now, yes, but now I see things as they are. Oh, how can you have been so blind?"

"My dear child . . ."

"Don't call me 'my dear child.' I'm a woman. I wasn't until ten days ago, but I am now, after all that I've been going through. He just wants a wife, and he thought I'd do; he never loved me and he lied to me. He was loving you all the time and only you. Oh, I can see why he loves you; men are like that, I suppose; they care only for women's faces. And it doesn't matter who she is, not even though she's a woman like you." With growing bitterness she added, "A woman like you, about whom no one knows anything except that she's a widow, and yet that she isn't a widow, and all the same she hasn't got a husband."

Mrs. Caldecot drew back, as if she were afraid she might do the girl violence. In a low tone she replied: "So you've come here to insult me, have you? Let me tell you again that you may go too far in your insolence."

"Well, it's true."

"It's not true," said Mrs. Caldecot, and her eyes opened wide as a thought came to her. "It's not true." She swallowed, for this effort, the thing she now had to do, even for the sake of Bob, was very difficult. So for a moment she used dignity as a protection: "It's not true. I'll make you sorry that you've taken it upon yourself to insult a woman because her husband's business takes him abroad.

I'll have you know, not only that I'm not a widow, and that I've got a husband, but that he's in that room." She pointed to the ell: "Yes, in that room, reading the evening paper. He uses it as a smoking-room when he's at home." Patricia looked at her, terrified and abashed. "In that room," said Mrs. Caldecot, still pointing. Then, in a drawing-roomy voice, "I should be charmed for you to make his acquaintance." With even step, taut with sacrifice, and extraordinarily resolute, Mrs. Caldecot went to the ell, opened the doors and said: "Geoffrey, come in here for a moment, will you? I want to introduce you to my friend, Miss Neale."

Patricia stared at the man who came in. She understood of the situation only that she had made a fool of herself, one of those impossible, raw fools, as young girls do when they presume upon slight knowledge. After a moment, a hot blush of shame covered her features, and she turned away, as if she could not bear to look at them. Then her shame grew vocal. Feeling in a state of inferiority she said to Mrs. Caldecot in a faint voice, "Oh, I beg your pardon." Then for the first time she smiled, a happy smile of childish security and incredulous relief, a lovely, youthful smile that obscured all doubt, set aside all despair. With an impulsive gesture she seized the elder woman's hand and, looking up with wet eyes, said in a whisper, "Oh, Mrs. Caldecot . . . I'm so happy."

CHAPTER XI

THE MIND OF STEPHEN BRITFORD

INTO the broad court, that morning, the sun poured itself out, powdered with dust. The plane trees were heavy with insect life, and above the fountain the pigeons busily circled, or pecked among the gravel for stray seeds. Stephen Britford looked out upon the blackened block of the Georgian building opposite, where now the sun cast rosy tints. It always pleased him, this outlook, the most beautiful in the Temple. Half his life he had enjoyed this serenity, the mellow calm of the old inn. But this morning it gave him nothing; it held for him no hint of the unimportance of things, of the indifference of life to the living. He sighed, and once more took up Bradshaw, in which he had been seeking inspiration for a holiday. The courts would rise next month. Scotland? Deauville? For a moment he wondered whether he'd care for the Norwegian fjords, which he had never visited. But, all at once, a sort of weakness came upon the hard little K. C. He put down the book. At home or abroad, what did it matter? What reason had he to leave town at all, except that if he stayed the

desertion, the inactivity of the place would force him more deeply into a self where he found no rest. He was very unhappy, and repose increased his unhappiness; only movement helped him; that was why he got up to walk about the room.

It was a beautiful room. It had none of the dinginess, the dustiness of so many rooms in the Temple. The high wainscoting of oak was surmounted by brown paper. The stained boards were almost entirely concealed by a great Persian carpet of delicate fritillarian design. He worked at a large Louis XVI bureau, scrolled, inlaid, bebrassed, a bureau for megrims and periwigs. And, because Britford loved space, there were only two fine old Queen Anne chairs, one for himself, one for visitors. Against one wall stood a tallboy of Spanish mahogany, exquisitely inlaid with a lighter wood. Though this furniture had neighbored him for twenty-five years, Britford often found pleasure in its recognized beauty, in its self-assuredness; his furniture had been praised for hundreds of years, but remained superior to admiration. It accorded in perfect harmony with the old buildings of the silent court. All the same, that heavy summer morning, Britford knew that these accessories of the comfortable life were not enough, that he harbored desires, despairing hopes, perhaps even ambitions, and that all this still life was not life. He went to the window and looked out. Two workmen went by, carrying tool bags. A small boy rushed through

the court into a black passage; a girl passed; one of the workmen turned to look back at her. Not much was happening in the court, but the workman's gesture, as he turned, the sudden view of his rather pleasant, blunt young features, that were for a second comically splashed with sunlight percolating through the leaves of the plane trees—somehow that hurt Stephen Britford, Britford, K.C., almost famous . . . and almost fifty.

He thought: "If I wasn't fifty I suppose she would." But he knew that he was wrong and unjust; it wasn't because he was fifty that Mrs. Caldecot would not listen to him. She'd refused him when he was thirty-two, refused him at forty, refused him again the other day. No, it wasn't that, it wasn't youth, and for a moment he was almost ashamed of himself for having thought that a woman such as that could be lost by wrinkles and gray hair. She didn't love him, never had. If he told himself that it was because he was fifty, it was because the immense doggedness of his character suggested that if he still had twenty years before him, he'd hunt her down yet. Hunt her down! Yes, that was the thing. He'd been doing it for eighteen years, hunting her in the open when she was a maid, and waiting when she was wedded, hunting her again when Geoffrey went away, waiting again, and now once more in the open . . . tally ho! He smiled. He felt ridiculous, but it was a bitter little smile, a smile which promised no success. He'd hunted

her all his life, and he wasn't going to give in while his quarry was alive and he'd breath to run. But, as he reflected how often she had eluded him, how vain had been this pursuit, a sort of rage seized him. Yes, he wanted to hunt her down, not only for the enjoyment of his prey, but for the joy of capture, perhaps to humiliate her a little, to hold her so and say to himself, "You thought you'd get away but you didn't." To tell her so, indeed, to make her feel small, and captured, and dominated. He hated Mrs. Caldecot as much as he loved her. Only, just now, a certain obstacle was forcing itself upon his relentlessness. He'd been pursuing her so long: was he getting tired? Tired of her? Oh, no. He knew he couldn't be that; he knew that for him the years had brought no change in this woman, except that experience of life had increased her charm. He could truthfully tell himself that he'd love her when she was faded and white-haired, love her as a fretful old woman in a bathchair.

The quality of Britford's passion was the same as the quality of his mind; he was capable of love without end as of effort without end; desire and determination were twin in his character. Only he began to see that he might fail. He had not failed often in other attempts; he had obtained all the legal rewards he wanted; he had refused a judgeship the other day; twice he had refused a seat in Parliament. The things he had not he might have

had if he fancied. Such women as he had desired in a casual way had come to him readily enough. He had known his failures, however, just as now and then he had known defeat in the courts. Only one big thing had escaped him, and he began to fear, though he would not acknowledge it quite, that it might escape him altogether. So now, standing at his window, Stephen Britford was conscious of discouragement. If he had been old, if unsuccessful, it might not have been so bad, for then he might have been completely hopeless and would have been dominated by material cares, wondering how to make a living, or seeking a cure for gout. He had not this good fortune. As he stood there, neatly clad in steel gray in his well-fitting brown shoes, so well groomed and so well barbered, elegant and slim, he did not look fifty. He was a man at his highest point of intellectual activity, in perfect health, intelligent and virile. Yet all this energy could not give him the woman he wanted. He thought, "I've done all I can." Yes, he had done all he could, pursued, served, tempted, comforted, loved; he'd done all he could, and yet he had not succeeded. That humiliated him; for a moment Stephen Britford felt small. Small too seemed his successes, and his reputation did not help him. He felt small as a man, smaller indeed than the young workman who had looked round. Perhaps, too, as she turned the corner, the girl had looked round. There might have been nothing more, but for a

moment those two would have mingled their smiles. How easy some people had it!

Stephen Britford walked about the room again, and almost at once a revolt rose in him against this sense of humiliation. He couldn't get her. Couldn't he? He could go on, yes; he could do that, and perhaps he'd wear her down in the end. It enraged him to think that he should be repulsed, and he could not help wishing that he had been born in another period, when he could have hired some ruffians, packed her into a chaise, and driven her off to Gretna Green. He put aside this fancy; what was the use of thinking of eighteenth-century ways two hundred years late? He was wretched just then. He hated her having lied to him a few days ago, when she told him that she was going away for the weekend, while he himself saw her cross Bond Street on the Saturday afternoon. Just to avoid him! Oh, he didn't mind her lying; indeed he liked that: in his view it made her more feminine; it made her weak. Instead of facing him with a "no" she had avoided him. There was a little hope in that, for it meant that she was a little afraid . . . unless, and he could hardly bear to think of that, unless he merely bored her and she wanted gracefully to avoid argument. Who could tell? Certainly she had been keeping out of his way lately. They had met at the houses of mutual friends, for that could not be helped, but she had made her excuses. Yes, she was keeping out of his way.

It was then that once more a wild eighteenth-century idea began to weigh upon Britford's mind. It began idly. As if playing with memories of old-fashioned plays, he told himself that, after all, people did get kidnaped, that they did get shut up in lonely castles, that they did get compromised. It was all very well pretending that the twentieth century was entirely dominated by good form and municipal by-laws; a barrister knew better. He knew that there was plenty of killing and seducing, that the varieties of crime had not been forgotten as the years went by, and indeed that many improved methods had been introduced. At that moment his thoughts were directed along a double line. One part of his brain was enjoying scenes where Mrs. Caldecot was decoyed, bound, and gagged; scenes upon Italian bridges, from which she passed into a cellar by the Arno, where awaited a friar with a wedding ring. The other half of Britford's mind remained calm and legal, begged him not to be a fool, and reminded him that there could be no question of a wedding ring, since Mrs. Caldecot was married. The romantic half retorted that from its point of view that was nothing, added that it would find Caldecot and quietly shoot him. The legal half replied that this was not done by K.C.'s, and the confused argument continued.

When at last Britford returned to his desk, he, however, indicated that he was disturbed. Good form and legal habits, these could not be set aside;

he felt a little ridiculous, he knew quite well that he was not going to abduct Mrs. Caldecot, but what he did know, though he did not face it plainly, was that out of these ideas, out of his new despair was arising, not acceptance of his condition, but a new determination, a novel capacity for violence and deceit. He did not know what he wanted to do; he had no plan; he had even no intention of making a plan. But his thin mask looked harder than ever; his eyes even calmer and steadier. It was as if the man's natural resolution was concentrated more and more round a single idea. Once he had loved his career and Mrs. Caldecot; he had gone on loving, caring for his career more than he did, and for Mrs. Caldecot immeasurably more. Then, by imperceptible degrees, he had grown accustomed to the success which he had secured, but he could not grow accustomed to Mrs. Caldecot whom he did not possess. Thus had she come to dominate among his desires; thus she had grown into a necessity, become exclusive, begun to divert even his concentrated thoughts from the work he had to do, to pursue him and to trouble him, to throw him into frenzies of irritation, into fits of injustice. She who had occupied always the background of his mind was now forcing herself into the foreground, was becoming a fixed idea, an idea that recurred, that would not be driven away. He could see the time coming when he would think of nothing else. Stephen Britford did not realize that he was very near madness

in the form of monomania. He had always laughed at the idea that men went mad through love; that seemed too silly even to discuss. He did not realize that when a man gave himself over to love for a woman, to politics, or stamps, it was all the same; that a single idea could step out from its modest place on the borderland of consciousness and invade it, first as a transitory haze, then a steadfast cloud, then black, all-enveloping fog. Stephen Britford did not yet know where his passion was taking him; he did not realize that in his extremity nothing would save him if an opportunity came; neither his manners nor his habits, not the law itself, if the chance came. He would be capable of all crime, of all the red outrage, of all the slimy tricks which for half a lifetime had appeared before his eyes merely as interesting cases, affecting vague people, cases that were reported in the newspapers as true but had the quality of fiction.

"Oh, damn!" said Britford aloud, "what's the good?" He rang his bell decisively. The clerk came in. They discussed a case and Britford decided to suggest a settlement out of court. He thought, "Her ears curl back a little." One might pull one forward, just a little, and lodge one's lips as in a nest in that perfumed, rosy place, that was warm and sheltered.

Stephen Britford, a year before, would have been incredulous if anyone had prophesied to him to what extremities his passion would take him. It was

with a sort of skeptical self-contempt that he found himself now rejoicing in traces of her if he could not obtain more, in a few cool, affectionate letters she had written him, accepting an invitation, or condoling on a cold; in a mediocre photograph of her, ten years old and unequal to her present beauty. This was sentimental and exquisite, and though sometimes he was tempted to destroy these poor tokens of a hopeless desire, he could not. They furnished him with a noxious self-indulgence; when he examined them, it was with a sense of secrecy, of succumbing to a vice. He was to sink further into degradation, see his middle-aged dignity rival the follies of adolescence. All that was hers being invested with charm, he found himself once or twice going out of his way to pass her house, to look up and notice that the geraniums and marguerites were wilting in the heat, to glance quickly down her area and see her servants having tea. All the feeble satisfactions of the aspiring lover were his at fifty. He did not know how pitiful he was.

One night, at the end of July, he had dined quite close, in Lowndes Square. It had been dull, dull; he suspected that already the wine was disagreeing with him. Having left at eleven o'clock, he pictured himself returning to his lonely rooms; a depression rose swiftly in him, enveloping him entirely. He hesitated a moment in the square. He wanted to be strong and free, but he felt so alone and so suddenly old, so dependent, so much in need of a word,

the touch that comforts, that in spite of the hour he wondered whether Mrs. Caldecot would be in. Just to see her for a moment, to hold her hand, and say good-bye, to go away again, despairing and hopeful, but somehow invigorated. He thought: "It's eleven o'clock. Don't be absurd. She'll be out, or in bed." Also he despised himself as he decided that he'd go straight to Hyde Park Corner and find a taxi . . . then turned north. After all, it wasn't much out of his way. He went up Seville Street on the side of the road opposite Mrs. Caldecot's house. He walked fast, as if convincing himself that this was really a short cut. Of course, he couldn't do anything. He'd just go past and look up at her window without stopping. But as he reached the frontage he knew so well, he walked slower. He stopped. Now indeed the temptation was terrible, for lights shone in the drawing-room, and one of the windows was open. The fact that it was open made it worse. She was so near, so near that if he went up to the area railings and called to her she would hear him. He wanted very badly to do that, but the remains of his pride forbade that within a few steps of Knightsbride he should play Romeo. All the same he did not go away; he was drawn and repulsed, and the two impulses kept him fastened there, unable to take, unable to forsake. Stephen Britford stood before the house, for a long time, taking no notice of the few passers-by. Those lights fascinated him as

surely as they might have a moth. He could not leave them, but, less fortunate than the moth, he could not hope to be burned up in their flame.

If Stephen Britford had arrived two or three minutes earlier, he would have concluded that Mrs. Caldecot was giving a small party, for he would see the slight figure of a girl in a velvet cloak leap into her waiting taxi and drive away. But he had not come to this conclusion, when suddenly the door opened to let out a man in evening clothes. Almost simultaneously the lights in the drawing-room went out. This coincidence had upon Britford a shattering effect. She'd been receiving a man alone! One glance at the silhouette had already told him that it was not Rodbourne, not the lover returned, nor the fiancée already on the sly betraying his future wife with an older love. The man was three or four inches shorter than Rodbourne, and for a moment Britford watched him go up Seville Street, swagging a little. Suddenly he found himself walking in the same direction. Jealousy was upon him. He had suffered greatly by Mrs. Caldecot, stood her marriage, stood her self-abandonment to another man; now she was free while he pursued her, and it seemed that she preferred another man! This completely drove out of Britford his legal prudences. He was going to know who that man was, and so he followed him.

Together they turned westward, and Britford gained on him a little as they passed the Hyde Park

Hotel. A little further on the man stopped and looked about the street, obviously waiting for a taxi. Britford hurriedly concealed himself in the doorway of a tobacconist. He guessed from a movement that the man thought of going back to the cab rank opposite the hotel, then that he decided not to bother. But all the taxis were at this time coming back from the theaters, and not one was going east. So the man at last went on toward the west, while Britford resumed his pursuit. It was then that he became crafty. He realized that he would create suspicion if he practically accosted the man, if he knew him. So he crossed the road, and, very hot, began to walk fast enough to outstrip the man; it took him some time to do so sufficiently to be able to cross the road in a dark place, and to manage his movements so as to reach the pavement just as the man passed a lamp-post. As he saw him for a second, Britford hesitated and it was an effort to walk on. He wanted to think there was a mistake, but that was impossible. Geoffrey Caldecot! Much older, smart, but too smart. Why? Then a new coolness came to Britford. He must see the end of this. He knew that Caldecot had not noticed him, for he had not met his eyes. With simple craft Britford bent down to retie his shoelace, while Caldecot passed him. Very soon Britford was able to follow him. Caldecot did not turn round; in a few minutes Britford saw him enter a small hotel near Kensington Gore.

Britford slept hardly at all that night. Now he suffered less from jealousy than from complete bewilderment. He had to believe that Mrs. Caldecot was seeing her husband for reasons of her own, which she had kept from him. She'd been deceiving him, then. But why should he come? This man, forgotten in London for the last thirteen years. "Perhaps," thought Britford, with sudden savagery, "perhaps he hasn't been as forgotten as people think; perhaps he's been there all the time." Perhaps Claire has deceived not only me, but Rodbourne, treating her husband as a lover." He did not find this idea burlesque, for he was at a point where everything seemed possible. He had, during his career, sat so often in court while the most extraordinary results of human passions were exhibited, that he could believe anything. Now that he was running into the incredible, an idea such as this ceased to be incredible, but became actual, possible, probable. He fell asleep at last, out of exhaustion, but early next morning he felt that he could not go to his chambers in this state of disturbance and anxiety. So he called on Mrs. Caldecot. She seemed surprised, but quite calm. He made weak excuses about not being able to get hold of her in those days unless he came with the milk. She laughed, and he hated her for laughing, this woman who was concealing something from him and, worse still, something which she had to hide, to conceal, because she did not love him.

He obtained nothing from her, and at last went away to submit the problem to hypothesis. He did not progress very far, for he could see no precise reason for Caldecot's return. They couldn't be reconciled or Caldecot wouldn't have gone away. Anyhow, if there had been a reconciliation, Mrs. Caldecot was an old friend enough to tell him something about it. No, it couldn't be that. Then what could it be? For one moment Britford made the correct supposition; he said to himself, "I wonder if he's blackmailing her?" Then he rejected this as absurd, because the things that happen always seem incredible until they do happen. Still, there must have been a reason. Perhaps Caldecot had some financial matter to discuss. After all, he was still her husband with an interest in her property. But that did not explain Mrs. Caldecot's silence. Surely Geoffrey's visit must have disturbed her; surely she did not think that she could deal alone with such a man. She would naturally have needed a solicitor or a barrister, and in so delicate a matter, she would choose him, a friend of twenty years' standing. It was this that increased Britford's suspicions: if she did not tell him, it was because she had something to conceal from him. And what could she conceal but the new illegitimacy of a legitimate affection?

That idea came to him only two days later, came to him clearly, that is, for he had been suspicious of it almost at once; after enraging him into doubt it suddenly subjected him. He passed the day in

complete misery. He had been beaten so often by other men in this dearest contest. Now indeed he felt his age, and the greater emptiness of the many years which his vigorous body would compel him to survive. He left his chambers at about three o'clock, walked about aimlessly among the crowds in the Strand, and later, his eyes upon the ground, passed by the linked couples on the Embankment. At nine o'clock, having had no dinner, he went to bed and slept the sleep of exhaustion until eight next morning. As he woke up, he realized a change in himself. He felt cool and strong. Now indeed he reacted from the feebleness of the day before. He got up, stung himself into activity with a cold bath. Over a cigar after breakfast he saw himself as a new man, a purposeful, desperate man. He didn't care what sort of a woman she was; he wanted her, and nothing should stop him, whatever it was. The law? Damn the law! He was seized by a sort of frenzy, as if those long years of conformity to convention, of respect for statutes were producing in him the revolt, the reaction which leads the balked adventurer to crime. He did not think himself absurd now as he developed a cool and perfect scheme. The game was so serious that he could not see its humor. So, after a while, he sent for a taxi, which took him to Caldecot's hotel. A few minutes later he came down the steps, aimless and defeated: Mr. and Mrs. Caldecot, the reception office said, had left two hours before.

Stephen Britford went to Scotland a fortnight later; he fished a great deal; and conversed with perfect common sense on butcher blue or whatever might be the fly of the day; he appeared at Ballater with a motor car, where people sat gladly and found him good company. But, wherever he went almost every day there came for him a plain envelope containing a blue form. For two months the form stated that there was nothing to report, except now and then that Mr. So and So, or Miss So and So, associates of Caldecot, had been seen; the agency could not discover the whereabouts of Mr. Caldecot. From time to time Britford wrote a check. He did not now despair of finding his indispensable accomplice. The months might pass, but the agency would find Caldecot in the end. His associates were well known; some smart confidence trickster, some booky or keep would yet establish a link. So Britford was not surprised when, a week after his return to town, the agency informed him that Mr. Caldecot had returned to London and was staying at a small hotel near Sloane Square. The agency presumed that Mr. Britford would be interested to know that Mr. Caldecot's present female companion did not correspond with the description obtained from the hotel in Kensington. They could assure Mr. Britford that this lady was not the one who had accompanied Mr. Caldecot in July. That did not interest Britford at all. He brushed his hat carefully, and in a few minutes was waiting in a nasty little smoking

room, fitted with bamboo chairs. He had thought well not to give his name; instead he stated himself as the representative of a well-known firm of advertising bookmakers.

"Gosh!" said Caldecot. "Well, Britford, you're the last man I should have thought would have gone in for turf accountancy."

Britford stared at him for a moment: Yes, Caldecot was getting old, and yet he was only two years his junior. Getting very gray; and those pouches under the eyes, that was drink. Cuffs pretty frayed too. He'd be easy to manage.

"Want to open an account for me?" asked Caldecot, jauntily. "I've never dealt with your people."

"Don't bother about that, Caldecot," said Stephen. "That's only a blind. I want to talk to you."

Caldecot listened to the end. He was very surprised. Oh, not surprised in general, of course; things would have to go pink before he was really surprised, but he wouldn't have expected it of Britford.

"Damn the surprise!" said Britford, "will you do it?"

Caldecot hesitated for a moment. A vague idea of fair play struggled in his mind. It was less than three months since he got two thousand quid off her, and now . . . Besides, it wasn't quite playing the game. Still, he was very hard up.

"Done," he said, suddenly. "Come on, let's go round the corner and have a drink on it."

CHAPTER XII

INQUEST OF A RAKE

WHEN Britford had gone, Caldecot stayed for some time in the ugly little smoking room, contemplating the hearth that was now filled in with an enormous piece of crinkled paper, pleated as a concertina. Vaguely it offended him. He did not like this unfashionable little hotel, which gave itself away by not having a fire laid in July. He looked about him at the rotten little chairs. This place wanted a few saddlebacks. What a place! and the pictures! wouldn't he ever get away from Cecil Aldins? Call this a smoking room? More like a bar parlor. Wanted only some distiller's ash trays to complete the effect. Then he smiled: anyhow this wouldn't last long, and a glow filled his body as he reflected with satisfaction upon the coming opportunity. Easy enough. And Britford thought he was going to get out of it for five thousand quid. The poor sap! When he'd got him it'd be ten thousand. He could pay all right. Caldecot laughed aloud. Once more surveying his surroundings with an air of contempt, he went upstairs.

Still chewing his cigar, he went through his dressing room, and without knocking entered the bedroom, where Vera lay drowsily in bed. He stood for a moment looking at her. No mistake about it, she was a damn fine girl, and, no doubt because he was pleased with himself, he liked her more than ever this morning. She lay upon her back, hands folded behind a round head, from which bobbed bright-red hair stood out like a savage halo. Her gray-green eyes were half-closed; she had a short, rosy nose with greedy nostrils; a thick, red mouth even at that hour was abundantly salved. She looked gross, but attractive by the force of her youth, her whiteness, her healthiness. Slightly imprisoned within a nightgown of black crêpe de Chine, she looked like a great white magnolia. "Yes," thought Caldecot, "she's a damn fine girl." It did not displease him that she neither spoke nor looked at him. She always was agreeably slow, and good-tempered in a sulky way, or sulky in a good-tempered way, how was a fellow to know? And he liked her abandoned pose as she there lay, one elbow on a crumpled *Daily Mirror*, having scattered the orange sheets of *The Winning Post*. These were tumbled over the bed, one in the middle of the remains of an omelet on her breakfast tray, which she obviously had been too slack to remove from the bed. All this animal untidiness somehow suited her; she did not make a picture of grace, the sort of picture that makes a man half-ashamedly rever-

ential, but she exhibited the solid world, the power of life, life of earth, heavily perfumed, soil after shower, smell of resin, of bursting bud, ammoniacal stable. Here no prayerful violet, but fat waterlily, strong-rooted, and drawing a thick green stem through dark water out of sullen mud.

After a moment, Caldecot went to the window and looked out upon the Belgianan prospect of respectability fallen among boarding houses. There wouldn't be much more of that. In an amiable tone he said over his shoulder: "It's getting overcast, Vee. Going to rain." There was no reply, so after a moment he turned and repeated, "It's going to rain, do you hear?"

"I don't care if it blows ink?" said Vera.

Caldecot came a little nearer: "Well, you seem in a contented frame of mind. Had a good breakfast? Pound of steak and pint of bitter as usual?"

Vera opened her gray-green eyes and gave him a glance which would have puzzled him if he had not found out in the last two months that Vera's glances seldom meant anything in particular. So he did not pursue the subject; happening to look at his sleeve, where the blue serge was shining, he remarked: "I shall have to get a new suit. I'm sick of blue. What do you think, Vee? I suppose that as usual you don't think? Thinking never was your *métier*, was it?"

"I don't know what you mean by mattier," said Vera. Then she yawned, with an air of having

spoken only because it was genteel to answer when you were talked to.

"Well, you'd better learn a bit of French while you can," he said, smiling, "because I'm going to take you over to Paris in about a fortnight."

"Oh, you are, are you?"

"Yes, I am. The racing isn't up to much over there, but I'm rather interested in one or two of their steeplechase meetings. I've got a tip . . . well, hardly a tip, but hints are good enough considering whom it comes from, so we're going to put your nightie on Scatterdust for the Prix de la Bodiniere."

This time Vera did not reply, but stretched herself, bent her body like an arc, like a sleepy little cat that's had enough milk.

"Yes," said Caldecot, musing, "I've only been three months in this damn country in the last dozen years, and I'm fed with it. Aren't you?"

"Well, there's pros and cons," said Vera, thinking of something else.

"Especially cons. Too slow for me. England's a one-horse show. We might stay a bit in Paris before going on to the Riviera. You'll like it. Never been to Paris, have you?"

"No."

"Paris was made for you. Might get you some frocks there. Sort of frocks that set off your beauty. All beauty and no frock. Only wait until I pull off a bit of business next week, and then . . ."

He resisted an impulse to say too much and ended up vaguely, "Then we'll be up in the flies."

For the first time Vera looked at him with an air of interest. This sort of hint she always understood. "What's happened? Been profiteering?"

"What's that to you?"

"Oh, I don't care. I don't care if it blows ink."

"Meanwhile," went on Caldecot, extending his program, "we might go and see that new thing at the Mercury Theater, what's it called? oh, yes, 'The Pink Brassiere.' When you feel ready to stir your vast bulk, Vee, you might go round and get hold of a couple of dress circles, no . . . a couple of stalls."

At that moment Vera stretched once more and deliberately sat up in bed. Her plump face set into almost rigid lines as she decided to make an announcement. "Sorry to disappoint you, old dear," she said, "but I can't do it."

"Why not? Got a previous engagement? If it's Schornstein again, I won't have it. If that fellow means to give you an engagement, he's got to come through now. But I know those movie men, and so ought you by now. Good heavens! this'll be the third time in a fortnight that Schornstein will have taken you out and . . ."

"It isn't Schornstein."

"Do you mean to say," asked Caldecot, "that you've got the cheek to tell me you're dining with a man?"

"You know," said Vera contemplatively, "you do take the blooming Huntley and Palmer, going off like a bottle of soda water. Who said I was dining with a man? And, besides, what if I was? You've got no right over me. We aren't married. Nor likely to be."

"What the devil do you mean?" He would certainly not have married Vera if he had been free, but the suggestion that she might not care to marry him annoyed him.

"What I say," said Vera.

"Don't say that," said Caldecot, "you know I don't like it."

"I don't care. I don't care if it blows ink."

"And damnation, don't say *that*. Can't you think of something new?"

"Yes, I can," said Vera, suddenly angry. "Yes, I have thought of something new. Get out, I want to dress."

"Something new?" repeated Caldecot. "How? Something new?"

"Well, I suppose, I got to break it to you. Sorry to hurt your feelings, Geoffrey, but our dream of love is over."

"This is very sudden," said Caldecot, but there was a tremor in his voice, which contrasted with the sneer.

"Yes," said Vera meditatively, "it was very sudden. But it's lovely. Geoffrey, I'm in love."

"Oh, I thought I was the object of . . ."

"I never said you weren't, but I never said you were. Oh, I got nothing against you, but I'm in love:

"It's divine, it's sublime,
It's lovely to be in love."

For a moment Caldecot stared at her. He did not yet take her quite seriously, but it occurred to him that Vera wouldn't have invented this sort of thing. She wasn't up to it. So, rather roughly, he replied: "What's all this bunkum you're talking?"

"It isn't bunkum," said Vera, in a dignified tone. "I've got a new boy, and if only you'll get out and I can dress, I'll pack. Don't look at me like that. It's love. It can't be helped."

"Do you think I'm going to stand? . . ."

"Oh, if you want to have a row, wait till the sun shines."

"I don't want to have a row," growled Caldecot. "But I'm not going to take this sort of sauce from you."

"You'll have to, old dear," said Vera, defiantly. "You can't stop me."

"And may I ask who is the man?"

"Oh, you can ask all right. And I don't mind telling you. He's lovely. Six foot, with black hair and blue eyes. He's just taken his degree at Oxford."

"And you met this young gentleman at Oxford?"

"No, I met him in the bus. Oh, he's lovely."

For a moment Caldecot did not reply. He had not the slightest feeling for Vera, but she certainly

was as handsome a girl as he'd come across for a good many years; also, she was placid and suited him; she was not too mercenary, which in view of his decreasing banking account, had, for the last two months, been rather pleasant. But jealousy arose in him when he thought of the young man; it was the war of generations. He was so angry that he felt inclined to hit her, but civilization was too strong for him. Indeed, he was so conscious that it would be inconvenient to let Vera go just now that he managed to affect coolness.

"Look here, old girl," he said, "you must be dizzy. I'm not trying the romantic stunt, but you and I have rubbed along all right, haven't we?"

"Oh, I got nothing against you."

"Well then, what's caught? Haven't I been decent to you? Haven't you been looked after? And haven't I just told you that we're going to Paris and on to the Riviera, and that you'll have all the frocks you want?"

"Yes," said Vera, sighing, "it would be lovely. And Jack hasn't got any money at all except what he can get out of his father."

"Then, don't be an idiot."

"I can't help it, Geoffrey, it's love."

Caldecot went up to her, and, seizing the plump arm, shook it slightly. "Look here, I don't believe you know what sort of a man I am. Don't you think I'm going to be played with. If I have any more of this I'll . . . I'll wring your neck."

"No you won't, Geoffrey. Besides, what'll be the good of that?"

"It would stop you making a fool of yourself. And of me. I'm not the sort of man to have you lying there talking about some blighter you picked up on the bus."

"You'll have to lump it, I'm afraid, Geoffrey. Oh, I know you can make a row, but you can't lock me up, and as soon as you're out of the way, I'm going to hop it."

He was still holding the plump arm; at the contact of the smooth skin, seeing so close the thick, unsmiling mouth, his rage took another turn. He wasn't going to let a girl like that go. Suddenly throwing both arms about her he drew her close, and while she averted her head, pressed violent kisses upon her neck and shoulders. She did not struggle, but lay warm and limp in his arms, so that at last, with exultation, he told himself that he was winning her back. He lifted up her averted head to kiss the firm cheeks, and then her lips, angrily rather than desirously, as if to affirm his recovered rights. Though she did not return his caresses she did not resist them, and so at last he let her go, except that about her shoulders he kept one arm.

"Well," he said, unsteadily, "you silly kid. You know you're a silly kid, don't you? It's all right between you and me."

"When you've done mauling me about," said Vera, looking at the ceiling, "I'll go and wash my face."

"Vera!" cried Caldecot, and the anger in his voice was now replaced by self-commiseration. "Don't say that sort of thing. You used to like it when I kissed you."

"Suppose I did? I've changed my mind. I've nothing against you, Geoffrey. Only I've changed my mind."

"But what have I done?"

"You haven't done anything." She hesitated. "Well, if you want to know, I'm afraid you're a bit too ripe for me. Getting sleepy in fact."

"You mean? . . ."

"I don't want to throw it up at you, Geoffrey, but I'm twenty and you're . . ."

"I'm . . . well never mind. Anyhow, I'm not old. Not for men."

Vera smiled with an air of idiotic rapture. "I don't say you're old, but you're more than twice my age. My boy's twenty-three."

"But look here . . ."

"Oh, don't let's argue any more, Geoffrey. We've been good pals; but you've been sowing 'em for a long time. Why don't you go and lead a virtuous life?"

"Vera," murmured Caldecot, now in an imploring tone, for the consciousness of age was oppressive; as he held this radiant young creature he had to look away from his blue-veined hand which lay upon the firm shoulder, smoother than satin, "don't say those things. I know I've been pretty racketty, but

if you'll stick to me, I'll run straight. Don't give me the chuck. If you do, I'll go to the dogs."

"Oh, no, you won't, Geoffrey. I don't want to be hard on you, but you got there long ago. Now then, paws off, I've got to get up."

"Please Vera . . ."

"Now don't let's have it all over again."

"Listen," said Caldecot, throwing away prudence, "I've got something to tell you. I told you we'd be up in the flies by and bye. Well, we shall. Within three months I'm going to make five thousand quid certain and perhaps ten. What about that?"

"Tell me another."

"It's quite true. If you stick to me, I'll tell you all about it."

"Oh" said Vera. For one moment she hesitated, for she did want to know.

"Ten thousand quid," repeated Caldecot in a low tone, as Mephistopheles might have whispered to Faust.

"It's a lot of money," said Vera, respectfully. Suddenly her mood reasserted itself, and she threw off Caldecot's arm. "No, I don't care if it's a hundred thousand. You think it's only money I care for. Well, you're wrong. I got a heart, I have. And I wouldn't give up my boy, no, not to be Queen of England."

Caldecot drew away toward the window. He could have raged, threatened, and schemed, if only she had not brought up before him this phantom of

old age, which so long had pursued him and now was quite near. He had not the strength to recapture her, but only the capacity to implore. "Vee," he murmured, "don't be rotten to me."

"Oh, you bung off."

Caldecot walked slowly up Sloane Street, head bent, as if without purpose. Then the church clock near by struck twelve; as he registered the fact he stopped, as if any outside impression sufficed to give direction to his vague thoughts. He stood so for a moment, looking down at his admirably polished boots, at his gray cloth spats so exactly fitting over the instep, at the lines of his well-pressed trousers. He seemed too smart to be so abstracted. The way his coat molded his rather bent shoulders, the angle of his Homburg set slightly toward the right ear, the clean washleather gloves and malacca cane, all this jaunty modishness made a contrast with the pose of weariness and abandonment. After a moment he looked up: "Twelve o'clock. Gosh! what a morning!"

He had not left the hotel when Vera told him to "bung off." Indeed, the scene had continued for another hour, on varying rhythms. There had been moments when he threatened her, and when she defied him, replying that she wasn't a white slave; crafty moments during which he tried to bribe her, to which she replied that love was enough, and that even if her boy hadn't any money, expense was no consideration; there had even been an unguarded

moment when he half-confessed to her the method by which he was to obtain the large sum, tried to tempt her with clothes, diamonds. And now and then there had been awful attempts to appeal to her pity, to evoke his loneliness. He had been ignoble, he who all his life had played with women, toyed with and discarded them, hurt them by carelessness, and hurt them for fun. All that because she'd called him old. Old! Of course, one had to get old, but only later. One was always going to get old, and one never did. One never knew it. It was hell when one knew it.

So Geoffrey Caldecot stared toward a shop window and asked himself if really he were old. Old enough to die. Well, that didn't worry him. He'd seen several people die, and they'd all gone quite easily, without knowing. It wasn't that. What troubled him was the long stretch between youth and age, getting ugly, getting weak, getting dull. Think of it! To become a buffer! He revolted against the word. Buffer! Not he: he'd be the galloping major to the end. But the silent voice within him replied: "You aren't galloping as you used to, my poor old major. You went the pace too fast, I suppose. Soon you'll be glad if you can canter."

Then he noticed that by the side of the shop window stood a tall mirror. It drew him abominably. He wanted to test himself, and he was afraid of the thing. He wanted to look away, but turned

to it all the same. Yes, there was no mistake about it. He was getting long in the tooth. Not much meat on that chin. Getting chinny. Almost as bad for a man as for a woman. Also, he had to notice a faint yellow tinge which spread over the whites of his eyes, but did not obscure the injected blood vessels. His eyes, that's what gave him away. Funny he hadn't noticed how pouchy they were getting, not wrinkled exactly, but pouchy under the lid, pink and a little shining, like the stuff about the beak of a turkey cock. And he seemed pinker about the gills than usual. Caldecot did not go further into his investigations. He did not want to realize that he had the face of a man who, without exactly being drunk, had drunk too much with cards and women. He'd been killing time, and now time was killing him. He was not quite humble yet. He told himself: "After all, it isn't so bad. Doesn't matter what a man looks like so long as he's fit. I've been too easy, that's what I've been. I've half a mind to get back and give that little fool something she'll remember."

He hesitated. No, he'd made enough of a fool of himself that morning. Besides, she'd be gone. Anyhow, she'd be back at six. He'd got that much out of her. Silly of him not to have kept an eye on her. Still, she said she had to be waved at half-past twelve and couldn't lunch with him till a quarter to two. Couldn't wait till a quarter to two. Caldecot told himself that after all things had turned out

pretty well, that in the end Vee had been civil and promised to do nothing that day. He could manage her yet. But, all the same, as after a moment he went on, doubts weakened him. It was not so much that he thought that he had lost Vera: his motto was "one Vera down another come on"; such was life. But it wasn't for her to give him the chuck. He might hold on to her for a bit, say for a month, to teach her a lesson, and then himself give her the chuck. That could be done, but this was the first time that a woman had tried to drop him, and this shattered his self-confidence. Also, the emotions of the morning had exhausted him. His legs felt light, and he had an ache in the back which threatened a return of his old lumbago. As he stopped outside a big public house near Sloane Street, he hesitated. He had dawdled before that mirror and gone so slowly that it was now just half-past twelve. As he arrived, a little crowd of men, who had been waiting, went into the public house. He wanted a drink badly, but drinking in public houses was a thing he never did within the six-mile radius. A bar was different, of course, even though one met there the same kind of man in a different suit. But he wanted a drink, so, quickly looking to the right and left, as if he were still well-known in clubs instead of being well-known in hotels, as if one of those pretty women coming out of the draper's opposite were of his women, Caldecot went into the public house. A few moments later, having swallowed two dry martinis,

he came out, chewing an olive, his head in the air, feeling already a little more secure. But this security did not last long; a couple of cocktails before lunch merely made up his ordinary ration; though they warmed him, they did not give him that lovely feeling of careless levity which he now obtained only very late at night. Secure, yes, but elated, no. As a taxi took him toward the west, he still viewed himself calmly. Indeed, he could not separate his thoughts from vague anticipations of the future. He was going to make five thousand pounds, yes, perhaps more. Spend them, and what then? Hold on to Vee? and ultimately give her the boot? Take up with some other sort of Vee? And what then? Get a bit older, find the Vees no easier? And money? It had never been easy to get, and he guessed it wouldn't get any easier. What was he going to do when sixty-two if he felt like this at fifty-two? Cirrhosis of the liver, which his doctor talked about, would be a long job. He was frightened; for a moment he even thought of investing those ten thousand pounds, when he got 'em, in good old railway stock, of retiring into the country, where he'd hunt a bit, keep some dogs. Might breed a bit; he rather fancied Bedlingtons; they might be made popular if the press was handled properly. It was rather cheering, this vision of himself in riding-breeches and gaiters, going round the garden to see if the cauliflowers were coming on, and smoking a cigar with the vicar over a single glass of port. But,

as he made the picture he knew it was not true; he knew that he could not imprison himself in the mud and dullness of the country. One couldn't turn back.

When Caldecot reached the admirable restaurant which he frequented, he ordered another cocktail before he selected his lunch. As if protesting against his doubts, he ordered turtle soup, truite meuniere, mayonnaise of chicken, and one of these jolly American compounds of fruit and ice cream. He didn't feel up to real meat, but he drank his pint of Mumm 1904. He began to feel better. The sense of power, which always came to him when he purchased expensive food in expensive places, caused him to look round at the other lunchers, at the men with a little air of defiance, at the women with the eyes of a connoisseur, appreciating or cheapening their charms. He leaned back over coffee and Benedictine, smoking a long cigar. He felt like a sultan. Pretty little "gal" in blue, over there. Nice fair hair, like that stuff you find on the roses in the country, what's it called, blight. And she'd got no end of a blighter with her. Caldecot laughed aloud at his own wit, and went on surveying the assembly. Yes, things weren't so bad. There was light and warmth, and there were nice things to eat, they felt velvety to your tongue, and girls, as if the business of the world were to produce girls, and more girls.

When Caldecot left the restaurant, his Homburg at the right angle, and swinging his malacca cane,

he went up Regent Street with a decisive air. He was perfectly sober; but he had taken from the alcohol a sort of self-security. Now, he was a gentleman at large, with money in his purse and more to come, and though he said it himself, a fine-looking man. From time to time he stopped to glance into a shop window and wonder if he'd have a dressing case or a new pair of enamel links. Or to look approvingly into the eyes of a passing woman, who sometimes seemed unconscious, and sometimes looked away with the absent expression of the woman who is noticing everything. He felt a gay dog. He turned round to look at a girl, and, as he did so, she turned. "A poor little drab," thought Caldecot as he went on, but it flattered him all the same.

It was just a little later, near Oxford Circus, that Caldecot found himself following more intently a pair of high-heeled black suede shoes, on which rose, graceful as amphoras, limbs veiled in tenuous silk stockings. She had such a neat little back. A new coat and skirt made of that nice puce boxcloth which took on sharp lines and paid for pressing. Chestnut hair, curling spitefully on the white neck, and leading up to a doggy little hat of black patent leather, trimmed with a green shaving brush. She went rather fast, so he did not at once catch her up. Besides, he felt sure of himself, and liked to give the fox a run. The girl stopped for a moment to look into a shop window; as he passed her, he whistled softly to himself: he had caught a glimpse

of one of those exquisite profiles which are all blunted edges, of short nose, of pouting, well-cut lips, and obstinate little chin. To say nothing of bright blue eyes. He stopped for a moment, gazing into the incubator shop and at the chickens that ran about. But his practiced eyes were upon the glass, so that at last he saw her reflection pass him. He followed. At Oxford Circus he drew abreast of her, looked her in the face, but she did not seem to notice him. This happened again twice before they reached Bond Street. There were not many people about, and Caldecot was afraid of speaking except in a crowd. She attracted him enormously. She seemed so young and yet so decided. An adorable, disobedient child.

His opportunity came just after Bond Street, where a little crowd was waiting for the omnibuses. In three strides, drawing close, Caldecot gently seized the girl by the elbow. Taking off his hat, he said, "How do you do?"

To his surprise the girl stopped, and, looking at him very coolly, said, "How much longer are you going to follow me?"

"Till Doomsday," replied Caldecot, gallantly.

"Will you please go away?" said the girl. She had set her pink lips very close and was looking at him steadily without any embarrassment. So the embarrassment became his: "Oh, I say . . . don't be so snooty. Don't you know you're very charming, and that I'd love to make your acquaintance? Come now, what shall we do with ourselves? Shall

we go and have a cup of chocolate somewhere? It won't commit you to anything, so don't be shy."

"I'm not shy," said the girl, "but I'm looking for a policeman."

"Rot," said Caldecot, "don't talk like that. You wouldn't if you weren't a baby."

Then, for a moment, he thought that he had gained his victory for the girl smiled. "Go on," she said kindly, "don't be silly. I may be a baby, but you aren't. Trot along; you're old enough to be my grandfather."

"I say . . . ." began Caldecot, in a sinking voice.

"Please let me alone," said the girl. And, as she moved away: "You're making a mistake, and, anyhow . . . why don't you look at yourself?" Almost at once she disappeared in the crowd.

Caldecot did not follow her. What was this nonsense? Wasn't he surrounded with couples made up of fresh young things like this and creatures who could barely crawl? But he did not go to a mirror now. He knew it was not age only which repelled; it was the fact that he looked so much older than he was, sodden and rakish. As he went toward the Park he thought, "I'm down." He sat in the Park for an hour, swinging his cane among the blades of grass. Never were his thoughts very coherent. He saw himself as lonely in life as he was now in the Park; he'd run his course to the point of wearing out; he was not like other men who, when they'd worn out their life, had some old companion wife,

some nice children, to make them believe that it didn't matter; he was an old worn rake, and there was nothing for him to do except to go on, still a rake, older, more worn, till he had to pay for what he used to get for love; to play nap with people picked up in the train, because men wouldn't take him into clubs; to become popular in bars, where smutty stories he'd learned thirty years before would prove fresh to the ears of a new generation.

Then it began to rain. He heard the rain come, pattering upon the leaves like the oncoming feet of an army of goblins. It spattered his face, and he did not move. It was not until the rain became drenching that he got up to go. As he went, he told himself that he supposed he'd better get back to the hotel, as a rabbit thinks of its hole. Vera wouldn't be back yet. He smiled; he knew she wouldn't come back at all. She'd packed her traps and "vamoosed" while he was at lunch. Oh, hell take her! He sighed. He turned up his coat collar against the rain. As he obliterated Vera, he thought without excitement of the business before him. Well, one job after another. He stuck two fingers into his waistcoat pocket and found Mrs. Caldecot's latchkey. He felt very tired. Now the rain was coming harder, driven by the wind like a shower of steel spikes. He went through the rain, thinking of something else, but old habit maintained in him the mechanical impulse still to swing his malacca cane.

CHAPTER XIII

MINIONS OF THE MOON

IT seemed very easy, thought Britford, as he sat with Mrs. Caldecot in her drawing-room, slowly pulling at his cigar. Too easy to be true. He looked rather sardonically at the woman on the other side of the hearth where burned a pale log of fire. She didn't know. She didn't realize. She didn't understand him. Didn't know to what an extremity he, the middle-aged lawyer, had been brought. Well, she'd soon see. He hated her, he almost knew it, as he thought of his coming triumph over her. And there she sat, peaceably crocheting some shapeless garment for the poor. They had talked of idle things during dinner, first with some constraint, for Mrs. Caldecot was still rather nervous of him. Then, as she discovered in him the old, semihumorous Stephen, she had become natural. They had talked of plays, discussed mutual friends; he had told a few of the latest bar stories; Mrs. Caldecot had laughed, as any nice woman must laugh at any man's stories. They had talked quite briskly, and so nothing of the slightest importance had been said.

Now, as they sat together, each on one side of

the hearth, in the conjugal attitude which is generally assumed by a man and a woman when they are alone, even if there is and can be nothing between them, Britford felt impelled to greater intimacy. There was one thing they had not talked about, though he had met her three days after it happened. That day, too, he had wanted to talk about it, and he guessed from certain hesitations that she, too, had something to say. Only to talk about that meant getting back to the old position of friendship and trust. He realized dimly that their friendship was compromised by her present condition, and that Mrs. Caldecot knew it. Friendship had been possible, while she was linked with another, but it was difficult now. "Yes," thought Britford, "you're a woman with whom one must either go on or go back; one can't stay still." But as during a silence he analyzed once more the dear detail of her profile, the full mouth, the downcast lashes, as he watched the tranquil breast that rose and fell, he wanted intolerably to come closer to her, to be a little more of her, of her spirit if he could not be of her flesh. So, feeling vulgar and indiscreet, but driven by that impulse to tear away veils and force confidence which is the mark of the lover, he said:

"Have you seen Bob?"

There was a hardly perceptible pause, and Mrs. Caldecot's hands went on with their work. "No. But I shall to-morrow. He's coming to see me with Patricia."

"Oh . . . I knew they were back from their honeymoon, but . . . she's coming to see you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Caldecot. "They haven't got a house yet, so I can't go and solemnly call, as the conventions decree. So he's bringing her to see me."

After a moment, during which Britford wondered that she sounded so casual, so uninterested, and asked himself whether behind such magnificent courage a den of wild things might not be imprisoned, he said, brutally, though wanting to be tender, "Dear old Claire . . . it's hard."

It was then that the gray eyes opened wide upon him and that a little tremor came into her voice. "Don't Stephen. Don't be kind to me. I can't bear it."

"I beg your pardon, but I'm not forcing sympathy on you."

She smiled. "I don't mean that. I know you wouldn't say things that might make you think less well of me. People do when they pity you. But I don't want a gentle world and kind words, or liking, or love, or anything. Don't you understand, I've got to find things hard? So that I may not soften when I run up against them. I want hard words, contest. How do you think I'm going to keep my lip stiff if people are decent to me?"

Britford hesitated. She was hurting him very much by making him feel nervous, now that only a few hours separated him from his greatest venture,

making him feel that it was no good, that he couldn't get her, that even if he did secure her physical presence, she would lie in his arms only as the perfumed corpse of some Egyptian princess in the ravenous embrace of the embalmer. Also, behind her courage he felt her anguish, felt it personally, as if this woman had got into his skin, as if his emotions were identical with her. He wanted to comfort her so suddenly he seized her hand.

"Claire . . . don't take it so hard. I thought . . . I thought you'd be getting over it. Oh, don't be angry. One does, you know, one does get over these things."

She looked at him rather sadly. "Dear Stephen, does one? You've wanted me for a long time: have you got over it? You see you can't answer. It's not my fault if I've spoiled your life."

"You haven't. You've given me the only good thing . . ."

"No, Stephen, no. I don't give men good things. At least, Geoffrey went to the dogs, and Bob . . . went away, and you who might have had a woman to love you, and children . . ."

"You know I want only you," said Britford.

"Poor Stephen. You've been chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. Let my hand go. Even if you had held your will-o'-the-wisp, it'd only have taken you to a morass. Let me go, Stephen, you're hurting me."

He let her go, naturally responding to this appeal, but his eyes remained fixed upon her, as he

bent forward, as he strove to cast before her a passion that must be contagious, striving as a bee to expend himself entirely in an act of emotional union. "Claire," he murmured, "don't think of it any more. Don't think of the past. Only think of the time that's got to come. Oh, let me love you. Just do that, and I won't ask you for anything more. Only let me be with you. Let me . . . be the carpet for your little feet."

She did not reply. He puzzled her in these new moods, this man who six months before had been calm and humorous, but now seemed pursued by the Furies. At fifty! Like a dead tree which, at the touch of humid spring, defiantly puts forth a crown of leaves, pale and glittering. He was so familiar to her, and in a sense so dear; he offered something definite in a world of mist. She nearly said, "Oh, have your will with me, and don't let me think." But the steeliness within her once again forbade that she should bend. So she shook her head and said: "No, Stephen, it's no good. I'd feel degraded. There, don't say any more about it. Let's talk of something else. What are you going to do this winter? Are you going to the Riviera?"

Britford sighed and accepted her mood; little by little the evening passed pleasantly. It was not till eleven o'clock that he began to be oppressed by the drama in which that night he must take part. He had planned to go away at eleven, but after the clock struck, when he realized that this was the be-

ginning of an incredible adventure, he was afraid. He was not weakening exactly, but he did not know what the consequences would be: he was the sort of man who liked to know exactly what he was in for. While he talked, he had visions of the coming night. There would be a scene. Well, it was too late to stop it, but he dared not begin. He could not believe that he had originated the thing that was to happen. He stayed, if only to put it off a little. After all, there was no hurry. So the conversation went on, but it dragged because of the preoccupation Britford had upon his mind. It was only at twenty past eleven, when Mrs. Caldecot very slightly yawned that Britford jumped up, resolutely now, and said he must go. Mrs. Caldecot saw him down to the hall, the servants having long before gone to bed. She helped him on with his overcoat, said she would be free for the opera. He agreed vaguely, and the door closed behind him.

Stephen Britford stood for a moment, his ear almost against the door. Yes, it was as usual, she'd forgotten to pull down the latch. He listened for a moment, not so much because he thought she would come back, but it seemed to him that if he wasted a little time, he would be protected against the beginning of this necessary adventure. After all, he could still stop it. One didn't do things like the one he had planned: but as he went down the steps he knew that one did, and that he would. He had nothing to do for some hours, and this

troubled him. He wondered why he had set the hour so late. What was the point of it? What the deuce was he going to do until half-past three? He might go home. Indeed, he turned toward the east, but as he went he realized very well that with this preoccupation upon him he could not sit quietly by a fire reading the reminiscences of Sir Henry Hawkins. He needed movement, activity. As he reached Park Lane, he thought of walking round the Park. That would take him an hour and a half. But as he considered the idea, he disliked it. Any idea was repulsive to him, any object. He was afraid; he wanted things to happen for him; he didn't mind being the god in the machine, but he did not want to be the god in the car. He thought, "Lucky she didn't put the latch down; they'd have had to pick the lock, and that's risky." He smiled at himself as he reviewed the plan. Yes, it was all clear; it couldn't fail. He would meet Caldecot at half-past three, receive the suitcase containing his pajamas, receive also the latchkey. He would go to Mrs. Caldecot's house, let himself in, quietly go up to the spare room, get into his pajamas. Oh, he mustn't forget to leave the latchkey in the lock. Bad slip that. Then, at four o'clock exactly, Caldecot would arrive with the two inquiry agents, enter the house, and catch him coming out of Mrs. Caldecot's room.

The legal mind, applying itself to frenzied device, saw that there was no flaw in this. It was natural that Caldecot should have a latchkey to his own

house. The servants knew that he, Britford, had dined with Mrs. Caldecot, and they did not know that she had let him out. It was quite simple: Caldecot would divorce her. He would be the co-respondent. Ruin? Yes, of course, but why not? What was the use of having amassed a fortune unless he could throw it into the lap of the woman he loved? even if she was reluctant.

As Britford reached Marble Arch, he put to himself once more the only thing that frightened him, "Suppose that after playing her such a blackguardly trick she refused to marry me?" He laughed to himself, and once more assured himself of the extremity to which he would go. No, none of that. After the exposure, she'd swear to marry him the day after the decree was made absolute. If not . . . there'd be two corespondents instead of one, not only himself, but Rodbourne, and Rodbourne's young wife should have her share. He could pay Caldecot to do that.

No, there was no limit now. Two men who passed him turned round, puzzled by his convulsed features. No, there was no limit.

Britford was ready to smash them all, to ruin himself; to disgrace Claire's old lover, to break Patricia's heart. There was no one he would not involve. He would have destroyed mankind. He was ready even to befoul Mrs. Caldecot herself, so that he might reduce her to a creature without a will, to a creature fit to be taken and enjoyed, even tear-

rul, even marred, even rebellious. No, there was no limit now.

Such intensity could not long be maintained; after a while, as Britford went on, a cooler view began to affect him. His resolution did not become less, but more and more he saw himself playing a necessary part. Again he rehearsed his movements, and, as he did so, his determination grew greater because it was colder. It was folly, yes, folly, but wasn't he entitled to folly after fifty years of wisdom? Wasn't folly the greatest luxury men could indulge in? The thing for which we should thank God when it arises in our breast. He'd lived by rule and the pursuit of justice; now he'd live by passion, if only for a crowded night. He might fail, yes, he knew that, though he did not expect to do so, for man might always fail when dealing with the coagulated mist that is called woman. Yes, he might fail, but it was worth trying.

He was in Church Street now, that was very silent, noting little details, the tumble-down shops at the top, and the orange curtains at an upper window. Some artist, no doubt. But the idea that he might fail had weakened him a little, and he suffered a physical reaction from his emotions. Fail! What was going to happen to him if he failed? He wasn't the sort of man to kill himself, he knew that. One couldn't commit suicide unless one went a bit mad, and he couldn't do that. He was too old to go to the dogs properly; one had to

start young to do that. No, if he failed, he'd crawl away, he supposed, to the Riviera, golf, and water colors. In his weakness he again was afraid to test himself in the crucible of fire. After all, he'd lived without her for twenty years: couldn't he go on? He stopped for a moment outside Kensington Church. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning; it was a swan-gray night, where shone no stars, a tender November night, warm as the cheek of a woman that has been beautiful, a spring night hurrying to catch up its vanished sisters. He felt rather hot, and did not know what course to take. A woman was coming toward him, going slowly. He watched her without interest, and it was only that as she came closer he noticed how she dragged her feet in little patent-leather shoes with paste buckles, that the droop of the shoulders, the hang of the head under a black picture hat decorated with yellow cock-feathers indicated complete lassitude. As she drew near him, as he realized what she was, her whole attitude changed. Suddenly the body was erect, the head archly held sideways; a look of invitation came into fine dark eyes, young eyes, younger than the faintly puffy, rosy cheeks. She smiled. She was trying to be young. "Hullo, saucy!" she remarked, looking toward the police station to see if any constable stood there. As there was nobody about, she stopped. "All on your lonesome?"

Britford stared at her. She had so little to do

with the things he was thinking about that he answered, "I'm just waiting."

"Were you, dear? Waiting for me? That was nice of you."

"I'm sorry," said Britford, making a movement as if to walk on.

"Don't go," cried the woman, laying upon his arm a hand encased in a soiled white kid glove. "You're a nice boy. You're my fancy."

Britford hesitated. The physical contact comforted him, assured him that life was real. Also, he was sorry for her, for she wasn't very fresh, and it was not only the dirty glove, but one of the yellow feathers was broken, and the lace blouse was pinned together with a steel safety pin. She looked so tired, with her lax face and her sideways gleaming eyes, so tired. While she held him like that, taut and hungry, he could not help thinking of her, walking all the way from Leicester Square, through the streets as they grew more silent, less likely to yield her food for another day, dragging upon the pavement those little black shoes with the paste buckles. The pain of the world was on Stephen, and he felt at one with it. He, too, had his share. Poor thing! How grateful she'd be. And it would be so easy, without struggle, without despair, without hope. Just to sink. Just to feel warm arms about one's neck and be sung as a lullaby a catch from the music halls. "There's any easy way," thought Britford, "for men as well as for women."

"Come on, old dear," said the woman, growing impatient, "or the fire'll be out. It's only round the corner."

Stephen withdrew his arm. "No. I'm sorry. But . . . here, just take this." He drew out his pocketbook and offered her a pound note, which she took, staring at him."

"Sure you aren't dotty?" she said.

"No, my dear," said Stephen, with a sigh. "I'm not quite sure. It may be that I'm dotty. Good night."

"Well!" said the woman, as he walked off, "you *are* a coughdrop."

"Yes," thought Britford as he went, "I am a coughdrop." His mind was so disturbed that he pondered for some time on the etymology of this piece of slang. To be called a mug, a flat, a softy, one could understand that; those words sounded like what they meant. But a coughdrop? Something emollient? Soothing, therefore gentle and soft. Philology, he felt, was leading him, as a Frenchman would have put it, to seek noon at fourteen o'clock. He wandered about a little longer near Kensington High Street Station, then into Kensington Square. Somehow he wasted an hour, sometimes determined, sometimes vacillating, sometimes thoughtless and resigned to what must be, as if prepared for a sentence of death, or its strange similar, a sentence of life.

Still, when some moments before half-past three

he reached in Lowndes Square the spot appointed for his meeting with Caldecot, he was all energy, though rather nervous and inclined to look about him, for the square was entirely deserted. The night was now less warm, and the mist, a little thicker, hung like a veil of smoke over the green-black sky, where a thin-crescent moon had at last risen over the horizon and hung as a desolate blurred glow. The silence was complete. Not even the bare branches of the trees moved, but lay muffled in mist and night. He felt disturbed because idle, because now he must not move away, because he must wait, unable to afford the opiate of activity to his strained nerves. His thoughts were confused. He rehearsed his part again, repeated what he would say to her; his mind turned to a case on which he was engaged, and he considered once more the course to take. And he had to see his dentist, too. Across the square, relieving the uniform blackness of the house fronts, lights were burning in a second-floor window. The best bedroom. He wondered what that light meant. A light at half-past three in the morning? Death? Love? Disease? The composition of an immortal poem? Or just a light forgotten by a housemaid? In his present mood, when his legal dryness was torn away by this intense adventure, Britford found himself sensitive and philosophic. That incomprehensible light, it was like eyes behind which no one can tell what is happening . . . behind which, perhaps, nothing is

happening, however much one may want to think that their clear depths conceal a drama. One didn't know. One just messed along a bit, and life went on. Funny it made such a difference, the way one messed about. One thought it did. One conceived in one's mind that things were important, and they became important. How difficult it was to conceive them as unimportant, and thus to reduce them to nothingness, to discover a world without suffering or pleasure, without evil or good, without hope or regret, a world in space, without physical upper or physical lower, therefore morally without virtue or vice. He saw the world as it was, suspended in space, without bottom or top. With a sense of discovery he told himself, "There is no top." All the same, he knew that there was a top.

"Well, Britford," said voice, by his side. As he started, Caldecot said, "Asleep, as you stand, eh?"

"No, I wasn't asleep."

"Good for you. You'll have to look alive within half an hour. Feeling all right? No weakening?" As he did not reply, Caldecot went on: "You look as if you wanted a peg. Too late, I'm afraid. Come on, man, pull yourself together."

For a moment Britford did not reply. He was staring at Caldecot. He was looking pretty bad he thought, old and ravaged; the way he cocked his hat made it worse. Caldecot looked "down and out." Somehow that strengthened Britford. The

fact that his accomplice looked haggard suggested to him that he must supply energy to the adventure. Somebody had to be strong. Responding to the call of his vanity, he said, abruptly: "Got the key? Thanks. Suitcase? Thank you."

"You seem pretty cool," said Caldecot, half-enviously. "Well, that's all right. You know what to do? You just go ahead, and I'll bring my fellows along when the clock strikes four. And, I say," as Britford moved off, "don't forget to leave the key in the lock. If you don't, we'll have to pick it, and that'll take time, and if the police . . ."

"Do you think I'm a damned fool?" asked Britford, and strode away.

Now he's started. All was well. He felt rather exultant, and his heart beat. Now "indeed" he was going to live, to do those desperate things that people talked about, and which, the law courts told him, some people did. As he reached Seville Street he thought, "Now to prove myself a man." He did not tell himself that there was device rather than daring, or at best, the daring of the gambler who empties his pockets on the last throw. That comforted him: as this was the last throw now he had nothing to lose. Firmly he went up the steps, slowly and very silently opened the front door. Everything favored him. There was neither click nor creak. He closed the door soundlessly. Number one: Key? Yes, all right: left in the lock. Number two: Shoes. He squatted carefully on the mat

and removed his shoes. Number three: Tie the laces together; put the shoes inside one's coat under one's left arm. Number four: Suitcase must not swing against the wall. To be placed under the coat, under the right arm. All right? Right. He listened for a moment. The silence of the house was aggressive, except that far away in the basement he could hear the drip from a tap. For one shivering moment he hesitated. It was still time to go away, still time to hope and to tread the easy ways of persistence. He wanted to run, but the collected energy of the last few days reminded him that now manhood forbade him to turn. So, very slowly, choosing for his feet the part of the tread that was nearest to the wall and which would not creak, he first reached the drawing-room floor, then the second. It was as if everything served him, for he had apprehended the difficulty of noiselessly turning the door handle of the spare room, behind Mrs. Caldecot's room: the door was ajar. Now, careful. He did not know the geography of that room. There might be chairs or tables anywhere. Once more he squatted; the door closed behind him. With infinitely slow movements, he released his shoes and placed them under his left leg, so that he might not forget that they were there when he stood up. With equally slow movements he opened the suitcase, in which was an electric torch. No. No difficulties. Nothing to collide with. But all the same he sat where he was, fearing that the middle of the floor

might creak. He took out his watch: twenty to four. Time enough, but he wanted to be active. So once more the slow movements began; one by one he removed his clothes, and dressed himself in the pajamas which, with the torch, filled the suitcase.

He was ready. Still no sound. What time was it? He dared not look at his watch for fear of making a noise as he searched the clothes. Would they never come? He sat in the blackness, appalled now by the fantastic nature of the affair. For the first time he realized fully the indignation that would overwhelm Mrs. Caldecot. He called himself a fool: her proud nature would not let her submit to this. She'd defy them. She'd tell Caldecot to bring the case if he liked, and she wouldn't care what disgrace fell upon her. She wouldn't give in. Oh, what a fool he'd been. Perhaps he could stop it yet. But he remembered that Caldecot, with his witnesses, would arrive in a moment or two, that he couldn't get back into his clothes now, and that even if he did a man like Caldecot wouldn't let this chance slip. Caldecot wanted his damages, and he wouldn't let Britford go. He ground his teeth and thought, "I'll go on."

Two or three minutes later, his sharpened ears heard the hall door swing open and then close. He had left his door ajar, and so, after a moment, there rose up to him the faint glow of the hall lights reflected along the wall of the stairs. They were

there. He listened for voices and footsteps. He heard nothing. What were they doing? Perhaps they hadn't all come. He felt madly impatient; his nerves were pulling him as strings do a marionette, and a vein in his forehead persistently beat. Why didn't they come up? He was terrified and enraged. He wanted them to come up, if only to make an end of this strain. It was only some minutes later that he remembered the exactly rehearsed plan: when four o'clock struck and not before.

In the hall, Caldecot turned to the two men who had followed him, one a young fellow in blue serge, the other, red-faced, big-beaked, with a yellow mustache, like a dying and drunken Gaul. They stood with a half-military air, as if awaiting orders. They amused Caldecot. It seemed such a funny job, being a private inquiry agent. And catching ladies on the hop. Still . . .

"Look here, you two," he whispered, "you know what you've got to do? Just keep dead quiet till four o'clock strikes. Then follow me and take a note of what you see."

The young man in blue nodded, looked at his wrist watch, and silently held it out to Caldecot: it was seven minutes to four. Raising his feet high, and laying them down flat, so that he walked in silence, Caldecot went into the dining room and turned on the light. This was the first time for many years that he had entered this room. It hadn't changed much, except that the curtains were new.

Not bad. There was the old Chippendale sideboard they'd picked up somewhere in the north. By Jove, that chair had lost its middle scrolling. He'd always told Claire it was going to bits. Very nice and comfortable. With a little smile that creased the hard mouth he sat down in the carving chair at the head of the table. Looked all right. Clarrie had kept the furniture well. Same old oils on the walls. Nice, solid old Sheraton clock, that one on the mantelpiece. Worth fifty quid these days. He looked about the sober, agreeable room, taking in with pleasure the thick feel under his feet of the green Turkey carpet, the reflection of a crystal decanter in the polished wood of the sideboard. It was so established, so absolutely all right. "Nice place," he thought, and smiled. He looked at his watch: three minutes to four. He'd better get busy. Still smiling he went over his plan. Britford should be corespondent. He fingered through his coat the letter in his breast pocket, which agreed to five thousand pounds' damages. He smiled: how easy it would be to twist ten thousand out of these people, when he'd got them. Well, that might come in handy. One never knew. At that moment he heard from the church the first stroke of four, got up, this time making no effort to muffle his footsteps, and went briskly into the hall. As the fourth stroke sounded, he said in a low voice, "Now boys, follow me," and went toward the stairs.

As the first stroke sounded Britford had mean-

while leaped to the door of the spare room, and laid a hand upon the handle of Mrs. Caldecot's door. There he stood while the second and third strokes sounded, his heart beating so that he could hardly breathe. He was in for it. Too late to back out. At the fourth stroke he opened Mrs. Caldecot's door, entered the room, and, as agreed, remained, his head peering through the opening, while the heavy footsteps of the three men coming up the stairs synchronized with the intolerable beating of his heart.

As the three reached the landing, Caldecot gave a shout, turning to the two agents: "There! you see! You see that? In my wife's bedroom!"

"Yes, sir," said the older man, "that's all right, sir."

For one moment Britford was frightened, for Caldecot might have been a good actor. A frightful look of rage overspread his features, "Britford," he murmured in a hoarse voice, "I'll kill you for this," and a rush of blood seemed to come into his head. The veins stood out on his forehead. As he raised a fist, the two agents, entirely deceived, seized him by arm and shoulder. "That's all right, sir," said the young man. "No need to make a scene, sir. We've seen all we need."

"Seen all you need," shouted Caldecot. "Good God! Let me get at him and at the strumpet inside."

"I say," murmured Britford, "don't make a scene,

. . . the servants will hear you." This was genuine, for they had not thought of them.

"Damn the servants!" shouted Caldecot, and for a moment the landing was occupied by the struggle between Caldecot and the two detectives, whom he whirled about him, causing them to crash against wall and stair-rails, while Britford, feeling absurd and terrified, stood before them limply in the wide open doorway. Suddenly the struggle ceased, and Britford jumped aside along the landing. There was a moment of silence. Before them, staring and rubbing her eyes, stood Mrs. Caldecot, her hair plaited, clad only in her nightgown; over this she held absurdly clasped an eiderdown quilt, which instinctive modesty had caused her to pick up. She stared at all four in turn, her eyes distended, as if she wondered whether she had gone mad, or were sleep-walking in a dream. Her senses still overwhelmed by sleep, she made vague sounds, from which at last emerged the word, "What?"

"What!" bellowed Caldecot, "what, indeed? So I've caught you. Oh, don't stare at me like that, as if you didn't understand."

"But . . ." said Mrs. Caldecot, and suddenly saw Britford, hands outspread against the wall. Some dim idea that her husband, with a couple of other men, was burgling the house was shattered by the sight of Britford in his pajamas. Her brain refused to act.

"Look here," said Caldecot, suddenly adopting a calm tone. "Let me go, you two. It's all right."

"Don't make a row, Guv'nor," said the older man. "We've seen what we want."

"So have I," said Caldecot, calmly. "Well, Clarrie, I've caught you. I've suspected you and that man for some time. We've watched you. You didn't know that your little game couldn't be kept quiet forever, eh?"

"Geoffrey, what do you mean?"

She was a little more conscious of the four men, and with trembling hands that failed to hold, tried to wrap herself up more completely in the quilt.

"You know what I mean," said Caldecot. "Are you going to try and bluff."

Mrs. Caldecot looked toward Britford. Certainly she was going mad.

"Well," said Caldecot, "we needn't stay here all night. You'll get a writ next week, and this man is the corespondent." In a sad voice, he added: "Clarrie, I didn't expect this of you. Nor of you, Britford." He sighed.

"But look here, Geoffrey," cried Mrs. Caldecot, suddenly regaining her strength, "I don't understand what's happened. But there's a mistake . . . there's something wrong. I don't know what all this means. Stephen left the house after dinner . . ."

As she stopped, the younger of the inquiry agents sharply said, "Did your maid let him out, Ma'am?"

"No," said Mrs. Caldecot, "I did."

"That's all right, Ma'am," said the young man. "I only wanted to know." Turning to Caldecot, "Well, sir, I don't think there's anything more."

While he put the question, Caldecot remained staring at his wife with an intentness which, in her present state, terrified her. She felt distraught, wanted to speak, but could not understand.

"Wait a moment," he said. "There's just something else. Will you two kindly get hold of that gentleman and his clothes, find a taxi, and take him home."

"Shall I get one for you, too, sir?" asked the younger man.

"No, thanks. I want to have a word with this lady before I go."

The two agents looked at him doubtfully. Then the older man, obviously fearing violence, tried to wheedle him, "I'm sure, sir, the rest had better be left to the lawyers."

"Oh damn you! don't worry me," replied Caldecot. "Do as you're told. That's what you're paid for. If you think I'm going to knock her head off, you're wrong. I just want a word with her. Now get out, all of you."

Britford did not understand. When questioned he pointed vaguely to the spare room. As the two men led him in, Mrs. Caldecot gave a confused cry and rushed into her bedroom, trying to close the door. Caldecot interposed his foot, and there waited for some minutes, until Britford, hurriedly clad,

came back between the two agents. They tried to take him downstairs, but he was so puzzled that he stopped them. "Look here, Caldecot . . ." he began.

"Shut up," murmured Caldecot, moving his eyebrows in a way which conveyed to Britford that this was part of the plot. In an altered tone, he added, "Be thankful that I turn you out instead of breaking every bone in your body."

When the hall door had closed, Caldecot went into his wife's room and switched on the lights. She sat on the edge of the bed, still desperately clinging to the quilt. Her eyes were frightened, but steadily directed upon him. She surprised him. He expected bewilderment, or terror, but not this strange steadiness. "Well, Clarrie," he said, "it's too late to discuss things thoroughly to-night. But I've caught you."

"I don't understand."

"You will by and bye."

"I suppose you're going to blackmail me again. I don't understand all this. I don't understand how Stephen came to be here, or what it all means, but I know what it looks like, and I don't care, and you can try to blackmail me if you like, I'll die game."

"Oh, oh," said Caldecot. "I admire your spirit, old girl. But it really is rather late. Now I'll tell you something . . . or rather, no, let's put it off. I'll come and see you to-morrow morning and have a chat, this morning, I mean. So long."

He turned to go, and this terrified Mrs. Caldecot still more.

"Geoffrey, I beg you, please don't do that. What's the matter? What do you want? Oh, what does it all mean? What do you want?"

"Wait and see," said Caldecot, with a smile. "See you later, and, meanwhile, chew it over."

Mrs. Caldecot listened to his footsteps on the stairs. She heard the hall door close. The events of the last quarter of an hour hurtled in her mind. What did it all mean? What was Britford doing here? But after a moment all this uncertainty was obliterated by an insane terror of Caldecot, of his unknown intentions. She did not yet perceive her situation, but she already perceived peril. It was that suggestion of danger which made her instinctively clench her fists and raise her chin. Some devil's trick, yes. There mixed with her terror a little thrill of delight in contest, in self-mastery, in courage.

CHAPTER XIV

GENTLE DEW

AT half-past six Mrs. Caldecot leaped from her bed. She could no longer bear inactivity. Almost unconsciously, after the house grew still, she had crept between the sheets, still holding the quilt, as if her muscles had been set into an unalterable attitude. Her mind was a chaos flecked with interrogations. The horror of the whole affair, the violation of her privacy, the insults, the sense of shame which she could trace to no wrongdoing, all this filled her fumous brain. Yet, over her sense of injury, there prevailed an immense perplexity as to what was conveyed by the events of the night. Four men burst into her house . . . yes, she understood that. Of course, Caldecot let them in with his latchkey. Yes, but why? Why should he want to catch her in circumstances of apparent unfaithfulness? To blackmail her? Yes, of course, that was it. She'd thought of that when she was talking to him. She did not realize that her mind was in such a state of turmoil that an idea which had occurred to her at once might be obscured by excitement, and reappear as new. Of course.

Then again she remembered Britford. Britford in his pajamas! With a little cynical smile that revealed her immense sanity, Mrs. Caldecot thought: "In these cases one generally says to oneself, 'Am I dreaming?' It's the commonplace of such situations. But I wonder whether I am dreaming?" Could Britford be an accomplice? She had to laugh at the idea. Oh, how hot she was. She flung away the bedclothes and went to the washstand to take a deep draught from the water jug. This was ridiculous, really. She quite saw that Caldecot might have introduced some of his low companions to compromise her and thus blackmail her, but he couldn't have obtained help of Stephen. "But then," cried Mrs. Caldecot, aloud, seizing her temples, "what was he doing here? And in his pajamas? I'm crazy. I let him out myself. Really, I must be crazy." She got up again, drank some more water. For a while she told herself that she might understand if she got a little sleep, but, of course, she lay wide-eyed, or desperately turning from her right side to her left, bringing up various facets of the scene, considering again and again this insoluble question. She even wondered whether Geoffrey had discovered Britford's double, and had used him for an obviously evil purpose. It was only a little later that she was reduced to immense misery. Whatever this might mean, however it might be explained, it meant . . . who could say? Some sort of exposure, of scandal. Or threats,

blackmail, anxiety, some more horrible days. Why? Why?

So, at half-past six, she leaped out of bed in a sort of despair; putting on a dressing gown, she went down to the silent kitchen, where she lit the gas stove. It did her good to do something simple, to acknowledge the advances of the cat, which seemed agreeably surprised, to brew herself some tea in the teapot, which the cook had overnight set out for herself and Maud. The tea revived her, too. She stayed in the kitchen quite a long time, refilling the teapot from the hissing kettle. She stayed there, not feeling the cold, mechanically caressing the cat, which inflated its black and tawny sides and steadfastly rubbed its hard, snakelike head against her hand. She was not thinking of anything just then. She was conscious only of immense exhaustion. Just as she was about to leave the kitchen, the cook came down:

"Good morning, Ma'am."

"Oh, good morning. I came down to make myself some tea. I didn't sleep very well."

"No, Ma'am. Would you like your breakfast a little earlier, Ma'am?"

"No. Yes. Oh, well, just as you like."

It was only when Mrs. Caldecot regained her bedroom and observed herself in the mirror that she was shocked by her swollen red eyes, by her strained features; she wondered why the cook had shown no surprise at finding her in the kitchen. This con-

veyed so much that she remained before the mirror in an arrested attitude. Of course, she hadn't thought of that. Of course, they'd heard. Mrs. Caldecot stood twisting her hands together in agony, as she made a picture of her servants on the top floor, first frightened by the noise, then peering down the stairs, and hearing . . . Heavens! hearing! Of course, they'd think it was true. She looked wildly about her. For a moment she was without courage to go on. If she had had a weapon, she might have killed herself. She felt rather sick. The future was now filled with indescribable horror. She could hush her husband with money, but those tongues below? She had just heard Maud pass her door. No doubt, they were talking now. Tongues! Mrs. Caldecot made for herself a fantastic vision, a sort of frieze of scarlet, twisted tongues, quivering gently, like flames.

She must have stayed in this condition for half an hour, for she still stood before her mirror, when Maud knocked at the door and brought in her breakfast. It was only a second before Mrs. Caldecot said, "Come in," but in that second some sort of transformation came over her. In that single second she had been able to think. "Maud knows; Maud knows the worst, thinks the worst. Well, let her think the worst. Let my best friend betray me, if he likes, to the husband who blackmails me. Let them all lie, and scheme, and think evil." As she said, "Come in," she thought:

"After all, I am I."

Little by little she realized the day before her. Her husband was coming. She knew what he wanted . . . and, no doubt, he would explain to a certain extent the events of this incredible night. But Stephen! It was Stephen she wanted to hear. She wanted to be assured by him that she was wrong, that he had not done this. The telephone was by her bedside. Why not ring him up? But suppose it was not Stephen? Could she tell him? That, at least, was how she put the problem to herself, for Mrs. Caldecot was only trying to think it was not Stephen; pride bade her do nothing, but only to be. She forced herself to eat a little, for she knew that before her lay a day of contest, and she wanted to be strong. Her husband was coming, and no doubt she would hear from Britford; she wondered which of the two interviews would be the more terrible.

She was partly disappointed when, just before nine, a messenger brought her an envelope addressed in Stephen's familiar handwriting. She could feel that it was very long, and she stayed some time, afraid to open it: a letter from Stephen! This made it impossible to pretend she had dreamed this. Still, she'd better know.

Mrs. Caldecot read the letter twice very carefully, her features showing little emotion. The last five hours had provided too much strain to enable her readily to react to the stimulus of revelation. She read it twice because it seemed almost impossible to

believe this story. Only little by little did she understand that Stephen wanted to force her to marry him by becoming her corespondent, and thus making social life impossible for her unless she married him. It seemed so wild, so absurd, like the sort of thing one read in sensational novels. Only by degrees was she able to tell herself: "I'm wrong, perhaps. These thing *do* happen. People *are* murdered. People *are* abducted. It's true." It was a terrible letter, so abject, so remorseful. It was a pathetic letter, too, for it protested undying love; it palliated while it implored. She was almost touched as she realized the extremity to which a practitioner of the law must have been brought to do a thing like this.

Then she hardened. So that was what she was to be, a toy of men, to be gambled for, schemed for, to be forced into self-disposal because she would not be wooed. She had a sense of intolerable outrage. "Could Stephen be crazy?" she asked herself, "to think he could get me by a trick like that?" She read the letter again. Only now did the story seem true. Well, she supposed she must take it as such, and she supposed, too, she must face the consequences. Obviously, Geoffrey would threaten divorce. His case was clear, and even if she defended, which she could easily do, so much mud would be thrown at her that she could no longer live in England, while a little more mud wouldn't hurt Geoffrey. No, she must go through with it, pay for silence. And for Britford!

There was a knock at the door. "Please Ma'am," said Maud, "the messenger asks if there's a reply?"

"Didn't I say 'no'?"

"No, Ma'am. You said, wait a minute. He's been here a quarter of an hour, Ma'am. . . ."

"Here's the reply," said Mrs. Caldecot. She found an envelope and a sheet of paper, upon which she wrote, "Never let me see you again."

When the reply had gone, she first felt very unhappy, for she had lost a friend, and she would not even have the eternal treasure of his ashes. That was over, and as she dressed she found herself taking unusual pains over the ordering of her hair. She put on her newest coat and skirt. The chivalric sense led her to decorate herself for the inevitable struggle. Since she was living in a mad world, she'd act up to its madness; she'd give it by her beauty and her charm, in conflict with all this villainy, the final touch of extravagance that would make it almost grotesque. She was ready just before ten, and told Maud not to bother about turning out her bedroom for which this was the appointed day, but to get dressed as soon as possible, as she expected a visitor. Then she sat down in the drawing-room where already burned a clear fire. She wanted to be normal in the midst of this madness, so she forced herself to read the *Times*. She read it even more thoroughly than usual, and dallied awhile over the personal column, where one item amused her: "Lady in Blue, why were you not at

X. P.? How could I harm you? Lancelot." "Poor little lady in Blue," thought Mrs. Caldecot. "I do hope Lancelot won't hurt you. I suppose he will. They all do. Even the Galahads." When she had done with the paper she went to the piano and played, rather badly, the most florid fragments of Liszt that she could find. She banged hard, and this did her good. When she tired, again she was unemployed, and she had to realize her preoccupation.

Why did Geoffrey not come? It was nearly eleven. He said he'd come in the morning. Oh, why didn't he come and make an end of this? She wanted an end of such agony mixing with despair. Suppose she couldn't give him as much as he wanted? And suppose he thought he could get more out of her? There was nobody in the world who'd lend her any money. Nobody she could ask. Stephen wouldn't; he wanted to get her into court, to drag her somehow into his arms. There was Bob, but the idea was abominable. To tell Bob a thing like that! To soil his memory of her with such a story! No, that would be laughable. "I must face it myself," thought Mrs. Caldecot, and as this came to her, as she realized that she stood alone in a world of enemies, she was invigorated. Yes, let him come, and come soon, to see how she would acquit herself. She would not give in. She'd not be the victim in a melodrama. She wouldn't give him a halfpenny. She'd dare him to do his worst, even if she had to pass the remainder of her life in an Italian village.

Let him come and hear that he'd get nothing from her. She wasn't afraid. But as the clock drew near twelve, as the dragging morning went by, she passed through alternations of feeling, fear, revolt, misery, even remorse, during which she wept a little, though through all of it ran her lust for contest, her desire to prove herself. She had to lunch at last. Whatever happened, one lunched. And after lunch again she waited. At half-past two she realized in panic that Bob and his young wife were to come to see her at three. Owing to this excitement she'd forgotten. Oh, this was more than she could bear. But why didn't Geoffrey come? For a moment she wondered whether he lacked the courage to proceed with his crime. She was a bold and direct woman, and so it did not occur to her that Caldecot had said he would come in the morning, intending to come in the afternoon, so that a dozen hours of uncertainty and fear might soften her to his purpose. He mustn't meet Bob. But as she wondered what to do, she heard a ring. She rushed to the landing to catch Maud and tell her to tell anybody but Bob and Patricia . . . but it was too late. Maud must have been crossing the hall as the bell rang, and already Caldecot was laying his hat and stick upon the hall table.

"Oh," thought Mrs. Caldecot. "I must be quick." From the stairs she said, "Oh . . . it's you."

"Yes," said Geoffrey as he came up. "How are you?"

They faced each other for a moment in the drawing-room. Mrs. Caldecot was terrified by the man's expression; it was as usual, lowering and jaunty, and yet there mixed with it something uncertain, something beaten. She couldn't understand that, so she put it down to the effects of drink. Indeed, what a wreck he looked. But pity did not last long as she recalled the injury he had done her. So, in a cold voice, she said, "What do you want?"

He seemed to shift a little, to smile in half-apology. Mrs. Caldecot did not know it, but there struggled in her husband a little shame. After all, he'd been to a public school and a university; he was a drunkard, a profligate, a blackmailer; he might have done murder or forgery . . . But he was a sportsman; he paid his losses when he bet; so far he had never cheated at cards. Now, he did not know how to begin. He'd done a thing that wasn't done, and this impeded him. So he tried to relieve his own embarrassment by a jaunty allusion to the events of the night. "Well, old girl," he said, "I guess you were rather surprised, weren't you? I suppose you know what it all means?"

"Yes. I've had a letter from Stephen. So tell me what you want, quick."

"Now don't get shirty. Haven't you got any sense of humor? It was rather a joke, really, wasn't it? Fancy you being compromised, Clarrie! Mind you, you've got the looks for it. I'm quite ready to acknowledge that, but the idea of your being

compromised with old Stephen! Lord! I nearly laughed. Old Stephen, in pink pajamas, and all the strings working in his neck like those of an old hen. Oh, dear."

"Geoffrey," said Mrs. Caldecot. "This is not a joke. And you know it. It may be that Stephen is mad, but you aren't. You want money. That's what you've come for, isn't it? You've come for money."

Caldecot looked down awkwardly. "Well," he said, "no. Not exactly. I haven't exactly come for money. I've come . . . to stay."

"How much do you want to make an end of this?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, as if she had not heard, not understood. "You know how much I've got. Do you want to see my passbook again? You can have whatever there's there. You know that's all."

"My dear Clarrie," said Geoffrey, affecting seriousness, "how hot-tempered you are getting. Doesn't suit you, my dear; fine, big women like you ought to cultivate repose."

"How much," repeated Mrs. Caldecot, hysterically, going to the bureau. "Say what you want, and be quick. In a few minutes Bob and his wife are coming. They're just back from their honeymoon in Scotland. So say what you want and go."

"Dear, dear," said Caldecot, sardonically. "I'd quite forgotten that affair. Sorry. You have my sympathy. It must be awfully hard on you to see Rodbourne again, with his latest. I always feel

sorry for yesterday when it runs up against to-day. But, there, get your mind off it. After all, I suppose it had to end. And look at the compensations you've got. You've lost Bobbie, but you've got me."

Mrs. Caldecot stood against the bureau, now not even searching for her passbook. She felt tortured, defiled. Yes, Geoffrey had always known where to hit her so that it hurt and didn't show. She did not then so much hate as loathe him; he was unclean. Saying these things, he was to her like a priest throwing back into the penitent's face the secrets of the confessional. "Won't you go?" she whispered. Then she had an instinct to wheedle him. "Don't be any more cruel to me than you need. Come back later. Come back at five. Don't be afraid, I can't run away."

"Oh," said Caldecot. "I see. You don't want me to meet them."

"Of course I don't want you to meet them. Can't you feel that it would be abominable?"

"Not at all," said the man. "What's the harm in it? Your friends are my friends. I made the girl's acquaintance last time I called on you, by the way. Nice girl. And I'm sure I'd get on awfully well with Bobbie. After all, he and I have proved that we have at least one taste in common."

Mrs. Caldecot went suddenly pale. "I've always known you were a cad, Geoffrey, but in the old days you didn't advertise it. Now, quick, let me get my check book; take what you want and go."

"No, no," said Caldecot, as he raised a protesting hand. "I'm not going, and don't let's start our new life with a quarrel. I'm not going. I'm staying. For good. Come on, smile a bit; your long-lost husband has returned to you to give you the position in society that you ought to have, and that no lonely woman can have."

"Go away."

"Sorry," said Caldecot, lighting a cigarette, "it can't be done. I'm going to turn over a new leaf. Oh, of course, I know that if I wanted to be nasty to you I could sweat out of you everything you've got, but I don't feel like it. Fact is, I feel inclined to let bygones be bygones. Let's hitch up again, we two, and see if we can make a job of it. Oh, I know what you're going to say: You think I'm going to hang about the house, drinking whiskies and sodas, and that I'll cost you a lot of money. Not at all. Clarrie, I'm getting on. Fifty-two. You're getting on, too, though you don't look it. So you see it's to your advantage as much as to mine." He sprawled back in his chair, holding out his feet toward the fire. "Fact is, I've got a hankering to settle down again. I've been racketty, yes, I know that, and so have you, old dear, by the way, but that doesn't prevent one from settling down." His tone grew confidential. "And, you know, we'll do better than you think. You know this civil aviation stunt; well, I'm on the inside of a new venture, commercial airplanes. People say it'll

never pay, but people used to think that about railway and the telegraph and the telephone. My crowd knows better. Clarrie, I'm going to strike it rich, and I don't want to leave you out."

Mrs. Caldecot was staring at him incredulously. She was reluctantly realizing that he spoke seriously, that after a life of dissipation and disgrace he was forcing himself upon her, as might a hawk, with blood-stained bill, seek in a storm the quivering shelter of a hen's wing. She forgot then the small, social complications promised by Rodbourne's visit. She forgot everything except her terror, because she knew what lay behind the demand; she realized that if she did not give in she would be taken into the divorce court. And then? Britford the schemer? or Caldecot the bully? Or laudanum? She was too vital to say "laudanum." One or the other it must be, and in that moment she wanted to fight them both.

"Come on," said Caldecot, "don't look so sulky. After all, what am I suggesting? Instead of getting money out of you just to loaf about, I tell you I'm going in for honest work. What more do you want? That's what you always wanted me to do. You've got it; so look pleasant. And, mind you, it won't be all work and no play. As soon as I've made good, people will start smiling on the nice side of their faces. You've seen that happen before. So don't you worry. Within six months we'll be giving nice little dinners, and having no end of a good

time. Besides, it isn't only that: Clarrie, we had one great misfortune which can now be repaired. After all, you're only thirty-eight. Wait till you tiptoe upstairs to kiss our little toddlers good-night."

Mrs. Caldecot found herself with surprise moving away from him along the edge of the bureau. She was wondering whether she could run away somewhere, jump out of the window, kill herself, anything. So they stayed for a moment, the man smiling in that queer way, half-savage, half-uncertain, the pallid woman inperceptibly sliding toward the wall. At last Caldecot determined to make an end of this scene. "Now, that'll do," he said, with sudden sharpness. "I mean what I say. You know I'm the sort of man who does. I'm going to stay, and you're going to be once more my wife, before everybody, in the ordinary way. Understand? And if you don't come through . . ."

"Yes," whispered Mrs. Caldecot, shrinking from the threat.

"If you don't come through, I'll serve writs upon the lot of you, and you're going through the divorce court, my beauty."

"Well, take me through," shouted Mrs. Caldecot, suddenly, "I don't care. Stephen thinks I'll marry him after, but I won't. Do your worst, both of you, I don't care. Sue for divorce if you like. You've gone too far, and I defy you."

"Do you, darling?" said Caldecot. "Do you

really think I want you to marry Britford? Not at all. I want you to marry me over again. But who was talking of Britford?" In a velvety tone he added, "I don't say I wouldn't bring in Britford; the more corespondents the merrier."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, feebly.

"I mean that I wasn't thinking of Britford only. There's Rodbourne. You'd have two corespondents, my dear." Mrs. Caldecot started forward.

"Oh, Geoffrey, you wouldn't do that. You wouldn't need to. For God's sake, don't do that. If you want to get free from me, you've got the case against Stephen. You don't need Bob."

"The more corespondents the merrier."

"Oh, don't you see that if you do that . . . Bob's only just married Patricia. She's done you no harm, and you don't need him. Oh, do what you like to me, but let her alone. You'll kill the girl."

Caldecot paused to light another cigarette from his stump. "Can't help that. You know, one can't make omelets without breaking eggs."

At that moment Mrs. Caldecot heard the bell ring. They'd come, and at such a moment. The combinations of fears broke down her resolution. She tried to be reasonable. "Don't be silly, Geoffrey. We shouldn't have much to live on."

"Oh," said the man, airily. "*You'll* have enough for *me* to live on."

Mrs. Caldecot gave two rapid gulps. Then, in

a low voice, said: "All right. I give in. But please go away just for an hour. Oh, for heaven's sake, don't sit there when I've given in. I beg you to make it easy for me." She went to him as if to seize him by the arm, then hesitated. "I'll do anything you like. I'll say what you like. Just tell me what you want, and I'll do anything in the world; only don't do it like this. Don't force yourself upon me so suddenly, before the world, before those two. Oh, Geoff, do be sensible. Let me tell people that I've heard from you from abroad and that you're coming back. I'm going crazy. Let me prepare things. Oh, I beg you, Geoffrey, go away. Don't insist on meeting those two now."

Caldecot's face was quite determined. "Don't be a fool. I've told you before; the woman knows me."

"Yes, but he doesn't. Geoffrey, I beg you grant me this first favor and it'll be the last."

"No," said Caldecot. "And let's be clear about one thing: I'm going to begin as I intend to finish. To be boss."

"All right," cried Mrs. Caldecot, her voice rising. "If you won't go, then you shall meet them alone." She rushed to the door, slammed it behind her; he heard her run up the stairs.

Caldecot did not get out of his chair until Maud admitted Patricia. Then he came forward with a pleasant smile. Dash it all, she was a pretty woman. She'd improved since July. She was a little shy of him. "Oh, how do you do? I didn't know . . ."

"You didn't know I was back?" I had to go abroad again after I had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. But this time I've come back for a long spell."

"Oh, how nice," said Patricia, as she sat down. "I suppose your wife's very pleased."

"Oh, very. It's been rather hard on her, you know, my having to be abroad such a lot of late years. But aviation business takes one to all sorts of strange places."

"Oh, you fly," said Patricia, woman enough to follow the man's subject.

"Yes, a little. Only for pleasure, though. It's business, Mrs. Rodbourne. But by the way, hasn't your husband come with you?"

"Yes," said Patricia, with a smile that made her exquisite, "but he's downstairs talking to the taxi driver."

"Oh? he's having a little disturbance?"

"No," said Patricia, laughing, "but on the way up we bought a puppy. He's in the taxi in a basket, and he squawks all the time unless you talk to him. So Bob's explaining that to the taxi driver and introducing them."

Caldecot laughed. "You have a kind heart, Mrs. Rodbourne. I like dogs myself. You must let me have a look at this one by and bye."

"I love dogs," said Patricia. "And since we're giving up the flat and hope we've got a house, I feel I must have a dog. He's such a darling."

For a minute or two, they talked of Scotland, where Patricia had spent her honeymoon. Just as the conversation began to flag a little, Rodbourne came in. He must almost at once have recognized Caldecot, for he paused at the door. They had never met before, but the man had been described to him, and nobody else could look quite like that. It was Patricia who settled the difficulty.

"Oh, Bob, I don't think you've met Mr. Caldecot. He's just come back from abroad."

"How do you do," said Rodbourne, coming forward. His fair face was handsome enough to convey none of his emotion. They shook hands.

"Mr. Caldecot tells me that he's come back for good," said Patricia. "Isn't it nice for Mrs. Caldecot?"

"Very," said Rodbourne.

"Yes," said Caldecot, leaning against the mantelpiece with beautiful negligence, "at last I've got good prospects enough in England, and though seeing the world's very nice, after all, there's no place like home. Don't you think so?" he said, addressing Rodbourne. "But, of course, you would," he added, archly, "in your present condition."

"Oh, don't chaff us," said Patricia, with animation. "After all, it isn't our fault that we're just married."

"Of course not," said Caldecot, "and besides, it'll soon wear off."

For a few minutes the conversation went brightly

between Caldecot and Patricia. Rodbourne said very little. He was civil, not finding it convenient to be anything else, but all the time he watched Caldecot. He thought how horrible, but still could understand the fascination the man had had; there was still something dashing about him, something elegant. And he had a turn of phrase, which, without wit, sounded like humor. Now Patricia was talking of Mrs. Caldecot.

"I do hope she's coming down," she said. "You don't know how fond of her we are; aren't we Bob? You don't know what a friend she's been to us, Mr. Caldecot, while you've been away. Bob was so awfully lonely, and she's been the best of friends to him."

"I'm sure she has," said Caldecot, cordially. "Clarrie's a brick."

"She is," said Patricia, intensely. "And she helped Bob an awful lot with his constituency. I don't know what he would have done without her . . . until I came. But where is she? You see, we can't wait very long on account of the puppy. I'm so sorry; we wanted to stay a long time. But I had to have the little dog . . ."

"I can't think what my wife's doing. When she heard the bell she ran upstairs, to powder her nose, no doubt. Wonder if she knows you're here." He went toward the bell. "No. If you'll excuse me, I'll just go and dig her out for you."

After Caldecot had gone, Rodbourne stood up,

and at once began to walk up and down the room with an unhappy, interested air. He had not been in this room for seven months. It had changed a lot, but a number of familiar things were there to move and hurt him. An old cushion; his ash tray. He had a feeling of guilt as he picked up the ash tray and looked at it. If Pat knew! He said nothing, and still went on moving about the room, looking vaguely at small objects, and experiencing a sort of offense because the scene had been redecorated. He was annoyed with Mrs. Caldecot because he did not find the surroundings as he imagined them, now that he chose to enter them again. Meanwhile, Patricia was following him with her eyes. She perceived in him something which in a woman she would have called disturbance, but she knew already that in a man it was merely vacancy. She didn't like this being aloof from her, even for a moment. That humiliated her. So, suddenly, she leaped up from her chair, and throwing both arms about his neck, dragged his head down to press passionate but childishly hard kisses upon his mouth. He submitted. But after a moment, as if he sought asylum, he clasped both arms about her and lifted her off her feet, kissing her so that almost at once she lay in his arms, limp and abandoned. He put her down suddenly. He had heard footsteps on the stairs.

Mrs. Caldecot paused for a moment while her husband held the door open for her. They stood so framed, these four, still as in a picture, Caldecot

looking victorious and faintly amused, Patricia still flushed with the kiss, Rodbourne, his eyes fixed upon the pale woman with the averted look. The moment was tense, especially for Rodbourne, whose mind was struggling with the incredible. Patricia had not told him that Caldecot had come back, for she could not mention to him her nocturnal visit in July. So the reunion came to him with its full effect of shock. As he looked at her he thought: "You soon consoled yourself. I suppose you couldn't do without a man."

It was Caldecot who intervened to break the awkwardness by saying: "I've made your apologies, Clarrie. I told them you were putting on your best bib and tucker." Patricia kissed Mrs. Caldecot, who had come forward, giving her a shy hand, fond look and thinking what a dear she was.

"How do you do, Bob," said Mrs. Caldecot, in a dead, still voice, the novelty of which frightened him.

"I'm all right."

"Did you have a good time?" she asked, throwing Patricia a pretty artificial smile.

"Oh, it was lovely," said Patricia, and, enthusiasm invading her voice, recounted their journey. It had been a long and exciting one. "And we had a regular adventure, you know. We went to Inverness by accident."

"Took the wrong train, eh?" said Caldecot. "Oh, you love birds."

"Not at all. We were perfectly self-possessed. Moderns don't take the wrong train on the honeymoon. But when we left the Isle of Skye, the weather was so frightful that they didn't think they could get into Mallaig. So we dumped ourselves at Kyle of Lockalsh, and you should have seen Bob carrying the luggage. Didn't you, Bob? And do you remember the sailor who warned you that my trunk wasn't a 'lecht wecht'?"

"Oh, rot," said Bob. "You made that up."

"Anyhow, we had to go to Inverness as the train didn't go anywhere else, and we came down the Canal, and we tried to get some Scotch pancakes, but the only thing they knew how to make was American waffles. And we saw a little post office at Gairlock, made up of two little towers stuck together, and we're going to hire it next summer."

Mrs. Caldecot asked a question. Patricia answered it. Bob was no longer maintaining upon her that surprised, sorrowful gaze, but he did not talk to her. For some time the party resolved itself into conversations between the two women, who spoke of frocks, and the two men. That is, Caldecot was discussing the share market; it was only by degrees that he managed to make Rodbourne talk a little of civil aviation, and the possibilities of Government aid. At length Mrs. Caldecot felt the strain; she saw that she couldn't go on like this with Bob. He'd been too near to her, so she addressed him straight. "Where are you going to live, Bob?"

"Oh, I . . ." he was embarrassed. "Oh, we've seen lots of houses."

"Can't you find what you want?"

"Not exactly. There's a little place in Curzon Street that Pat is crazy on, but it's got practically to be rebuilt; it's so old."

"Still, it's very handy," said Mrs. Caldecot.

"Oh, yes, in that sense. Anyhow, that's the place Pat means when she says she thinks we've got a house," said Rodbourne. Then he was surprised to find that he was talking more naturally. After all, that man was her husband. If he came back, what could she do? An evil-looking fellow. Poor Claire! His voice changed, and it was almost as if a new, a friendly intimacy could rise as a cool flower from the ash heap left behind by the old flames.

The call was short, however, for after half an hour, Patricia suddenly cried out, "Bob, we've forgotten the puppy."

"By Jove, yes!" replied Rodbourne, with comic anxiety.

"Really, Mrs. Caldecot," said Patricia, "I hope you don't think us very rude, but we didn't intend to buy it, and I'm so afraid the taxi driver's got tired of talking to it."

"Possibly," said Mrs. Caldecot. "The puppy's conversation may be monotonous, you see."

"Now," said Patricia, "what we really thought of doing in the cab was this: as I knew we couldn't stay as long as we wanted, we wanted you to dine

with us to-night at Claridge's? And, of course, we want your husband to come, too, since he's back. Do come. I do so want to have a nice long talk with you."

"Oh," said Mrs. Caldecot, "I don't know."

"That's very nice of you, Mrs. Rodbourne," said Caldecot. "We shall be charmed. We aren't doing anything to-night, Clarrie, are we? No? Well, we shall be very pleased."

"What time do you think, Bob?" said Patricia. "Eight o'clock?"

"Yes, that'll do."

As they turned to go, Patricia drew from her bag a square of cardboard, which she gave to Mrs. Caldecot. "That's Bob and I," she said, rather shyly. "It was taken in Scotland. It doesn't flatter me, but it's awfully good of Bob, so that's all right."

Caldecot and his wife stood aimlessly in the drawing-room after he had seen the couple out. Then, his hands in his pockets, head high, he began to pace the room, whistling the wedding march. Mrs. Caldecot had placed the photograph upon the mantelpiece, and stood looking at it, taking no notice of the sound. Her abstracted attitude worried him, for still he was not sure of himself. So he stopped and remarked, abruptly:

"Well, that's that. Bless you my children, eh, Clarrie?" There was no reply. "Now, don't be sulky, old girl. Remember that those two aren't

the only ones who are in luck to-day. Daphnis and Chloe are all right, but so are Darby and Joan. Come on, give us a smile. Don't you know that you and I are going to be as happy as two pussies in one basket?"

Then she turned and stared at him. Now she knew that this was true, that he had come back to live with her, to live on her money, that nothing would release her except his death. He was her master because she was helpless while he held in his hands, not only the terrible faculties of a social exposure, the power to ruin her by pillorying Britford, but also the power to break with a word those two happy little people. Beyond that he had other strengths. She was his wife. He had his rights. Her husband still! She couldn't get past that. The only thing to do was to accept it. But how accept it? He helped her.

"Now, my dear," he said, "it's no use your taking up a heroic attitude. Everything's over, bar the shouting, and so you'd better make the best of it. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"You mean you're going to make the best of it?"

"What else can I do?"

"Well, you can do it better than that," said the man, roughly. "If you think I'm going to spend the rest of my life with a stuffed mummy, you're wrong. You're going to be just the ordinary, decent civil sort of wife that it's a woman's business

to be. I'm not going to have pale faces and tragic looks. You're going to be civil."

"Of course, I'll be civil, Geoffrey," said Mrs. Caldecot in a tired voice. "You've got the better of me, but you know quite well I'll play the game. Oh, I'll be civil."

He smiled. "That's better. But wives are supposed to be more than civil. They're supposed to be loving. Now give a rest to those great big round eyes. You're a damn fine girl; come here and give me a kiss."

A blush rose in Mrs. Caldecot's cheeks. She was ashamed. Anger, though was stronger than shame. "I won't," she said.

"Don't be silly," said Caldecot. "Haven't you told me that you're going to behave like a normal wife? Don't try to play with me. You ought to know by now who you're dealing with. A quarter of an hour ago I broke down your bedroom door. If I've got to, I'll break you."

"Break me if you like," said Mrs. Caldecot, stepping back with clenched fists, "but if you touch me I'll . . . I'll hit you."

"Oh, I won't touch you, my dear. I'm not that sort of man. I never kissed a woman by force, and you're going to kiss me without. Come along, there's a limit to my patience. If you don't give in, there's just time for a couple of writs. Come on, I know the law. I've only been here in the afternoon, and even then in the presence of witnesses.

You can't claim that I've resumed cohabitation. So I can still send those writs unless you come through. So come through here now." Mrs. Caldecot looked away, passed a distracted hand through her hair, then murmured: "I suppose I'm powerless. Since you've come back, I suppose. . . . All right, kiss me if you like."

Caldecot leaned a little forward, fixing upon her imperative eyes. "I didn't say I wanted to kiss you," he replied in an even voice. "I said I wanted you to kiss me. Do you understand? I know that it's a humiliating thing for a man of my reputation to imprint a kiss upon the lips of his lawful wife. But still I like to do the proper thing. Come here."

Mrs. Caldecot looked about the room as if she were saying good-bye to it, as if in a second everything would be different. She wanted to remember it. Then she looked at the man; she felt now neither hate nor disgust, only weariness. Very slowly she came toward the figure which did not move. After a tiny hesitation she bent forward and touched his cheek with her lips. As she stepped back he held up a restraining hand. "Not like that. Kiss me properly. Put your arms round my neck."

Mrs. Caldecot did not hesitate now; she was learning. Without revolt she placed both hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the lips. Then she drew back and stood before him, hands clasped above her knees, head down, as if she waited for

further demands, offering obedience after abdication.

"That's that," said Caldecot, but glanced at her. Yes, he'd got her, and it was going to be all right. She'd be decent, and she had some money. But all the same he could still feel upon his lips that light kiss from a mouth which, as it surrendered, had retracted. She hadn't wanted to kiss him. He knew that. He'd made her. He didn't mind having had to make her, for he'd forced many another woman. But when they did it, it hadn't been like that; it hadn't been so desperate. She'd kissed him, hating it, and she hadn't learned to like the caress. Suddenly he thought of Vee. She, too, she'd left him; his contact had no charm for her. And the girl he'd followed in the street, who wouldn't speak to him. . . . The world of women was drawing away from the man who had seen the world as peopled with them. No woman wanted him, not even his wife. He had known attack, rebuff, insult, poverty, loneliness, illness; he'd been a danger, a man that other men wouldn't introduce to their wives, the companion of sots and tipsters; the go-between of financial touts. He'd gone into the depths, he thought, but to have women turning against him too. "Claire!" he cried, with an accent in his voice that made her stare at him, "don't! don't!"

"Don't what?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, dully.

"Don't stand like that; I can't bear it." He paused. A sort of pride was struggling with his

misery. "Don't look at me like that, as if I were an outcast. Yes, I am an outcast, I know. Damn it all! I haven't been worse than most men of my sort. Life's a rough and tumble. I got thrown into the mud. Some one's got to be."

She was still staring at him. Something in his voice moved her, for it was agonized, and she noticed how gray his hair had turned.

"Don't treat me like that," pleaded Caldecot. "You don't know what I've gone through. Oh, it started all right. It started cheery enough, but things have gone badly, you know."

Mrs. Caldecot was half contemptuous. "Are you begging my pardon, Geoffrey? It's too late."

"Is it? Am I too old? Vee thought so. Oh, I didn't tell you about her. Or did I? I don't remember. Just one of the girls. A few days ago she gave me the push."

"Really Geoffrey, I don't think I need to know. . . ."

"Oh yes, you do. You'd better know everything. I don't say I was crazy about her, but, there you are. She was young and pretty, and it had been going on for a while, and she gave me the chuck. Said I was too old. Too old, my God! I suppose one's got to come to it."

Mrs. Caldecot surveyed him neutrally. She was not disgusted, for the conversation did not surprise her, but now she saw not only that he was gray but that his skin was dry and wrinkled. Fifty-two, and ten years more for excesses.

"I can't help it," she said, without unkindness, just stating a fact.

"Oh yes, you can. His voice grew loud. "Don't you understand that I'm 'down and out'? Women won't look at me any more, and I've lived for 'em. I'm dead while I'm alive, and there's nothing left except to drink and forget . . . if I can. I suppose you think it's funny, me talking to you about Vee, but there, I guess you know I'm not a saint. I took up with her because one's got to have a woman. Just as a woman feels she's got to have flowers in the drawing-room. Oh, I'm not being soft about it. I didn't take up with Vee because she was a bunch of violets, but she was a kid, and I liked to have other men stare at her when I took her out. She was part of the racket; one's got to have it."

"Why do you tell me all this, Geoffrey?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, angered now by this exposure of sentimental lust.

"I want you to understand," replied Caldecot in a low voice. "I didn't understand it myself till the other day. It wasn't only that she was a nice little bit of fluff. It was that she was a kid, and made me feel one, too, made me feel I was what I'd always been, a success, all that. You women don't understand why men are always getting entangled with women; we don't always want to, but we slide into it because that's our way of making sure there's life in the old dog yet. Only, there's an end to it. I'm

an old dog. She told me so. She's the first woman who's ever given me the chuck. It was like things coming to an end. And . . . the same day . . . . well, I needn't tell you that."

"Do you mean," said Mrs. Caldecot, disgustedly, "that on the very day this woman left you you tried to? . . ."

"Good God! Don't you understand? It was on the same day I tried to get hold of another woman because I couldn't stick it, because I'd got the sack, and I had to do something. I'm old, I'm sick, rotten, done. If I didn't do something, if I didn't try to score with another girl, I might as well put a bullet through my brain. Don't you see? One has a sort of pride."

"And you thought I'd do, failing better."

"No. Yes. I don't mean that," replied the man, bewildered by the unusual complexity of his emotions. "Only when I got in here the other night, and everything looked all right, so much the right thing, the way a man ought to live, well, you know what I mean, it gave me a sort of shock. I don't mean money, but the idea that in a house like this I'd meet decent people, people who hadn't got anything against them. . . . Oh, I'm not pretending to be ashamed of myself, though perhaps I did take the wrong turning, but it made me sick to think of the mess I'd got into; I wished I'd run straight; I might have done things. Don't laugh at me, Clarrie, I might."

"I'm not laughing at you," said Mrs. Caldecot, quietly, seeing in her memory the dashing young man she had loved.

"You well might. But I might have done something. Gone into politics or made money for you to blow. Instead of messing and messing and becoming an outsider. Now I want to get back. It'll be hard, I know. People aren't going to swallow me so easily, but if you see, I'm at the end of my tether. It's all over with me unless you help."

"I'll try," said Mrs. Caldecot. She felt that she must try. Suddenly Caldecot flung himself upon his knees and seized her hand.

"I know I've been rotten to you," he said. "I was rotten to you years ago. I don't know what's come over me. Oh, I don't want to put it on. I'm not trying to tell you I want to live a virtuous life. I'll do my best, but really it's not that." He hesitated. "I'm done. And I want to die quietly."

Mrs. Caldecot moved her hand as if to try and release it, but there was such a fever in his eyes. She understood what he meant, that he'd taken all he could from life, and now it was drawing away, that the world of sense, which had been so vivid, was now fading before him as the pattern on the wall paper before eyes about to close. "Downed and outed!" Perhaps they were both "downed and outed," one by love, the other by lust.

Hoarsely he repeated: "She gave me the chuck. Said I was too old. Perhaps I am. Perhaps there's

nothing left, nothing left to do or to hope for. I was to you last night and this afternoon, that's all, kidding myself that I was no end of a dog and had the whip hand of you. What's the good of the whip hand when you've no longer got the nerve to use the whip? I'm done, Clarrie. There's nothing left."

She was looking down upon the bowed gray head: Yes, he'd been vile, and nothing could alter him. There was nothing to hope from him. But the gallantry of her spirit, revolted against the suggestion that there was nothing more, that this was the end. Trembling, and her eyes full of tears, in a slow, reluctant movement, she laid her hand upon the bent, gray head.

"Courage," she whispered, "my poor old Geoffrey . . . courage."

THE END

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